

Mitch WerBell: Gunsmith

By Roger Williams

The following is excerpted by permission from Atlanta magazine.

DOWN THE DRIVEWAY that snakes through the country estate came two teen-age boys. They were clean-cut and handsome in the traditional college fashion, and they looked at home in the quiet, leafy setting. But one wore a camouflage suit and carried a large pistol in each hand; the other had an M-3 "grease gun" tucked under one arm and a silencer-equipped sniper rifle under the other.

Behind them, propelling himself vigorously in a wheelchair, came their father, Mitchell Livingston WerBell III of Powder Springs, Ga.—soldier of fortune, militant anticommunist and one of the nation's leading developers of military weapons and accessories.

Mitch IV and Geoff chatted lightly about the weapons they were carrying. Their father, temporarily immobilized by a fractured heel, punctured the conversation with brief bursts of information about the sniper rifle, one of his most choice products. "This weapon had killed 1,900 VC in six months," he said proudly. "Those VC took only 1.3 rounds per kill. Twenty-seven cents apiece they cost Uncle Sam. That's the greatest cost effectiveness the Army's ever known."

Moments later, young Mitch and Geoff pumped round after round from the weapons into the bullet-shattered hulk of an automobile that serves as the primary target on the WerBell firing range. Then Mitch began firing a pistol, a standard Army .45. The gun jerked upward, and the noise echoed across the fields and treetops. He then picked up a strange, smoothly rectangular handgun, an Ingram Model 11, equipped with a "flash and muzzle suppressor," and began firing it. The muzzle barely moved, and the only sound was a metallic click, followed by the zing of the bullet and the pop as it hit the target.

The effect was eerie, almost chilling, especially when young Mitch put the

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to the 'Right'

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gun on full automatic and whipped off 15 clicking rounds in one second. Geoff provided the same kind of demonstration with the grease gun, a standard military submachine gun and the sniper rifle, which WerBell calls the XM-21 and which is also equipped with a suppressor.

On the way back to the house, WerBell explained why the suppressor, commonly called a silencer, is so effective a firearm accessory. "It hides the muzzle flash and reduces the firing sound to just metal on metal. You can't silence the bolt noise without an elaborate system, and it's not worth it. You can't hear the bolt noise anyway in a combat situation, so for all practical purposes the firing is soundless. Often, the loudest noise is when the bullet hits home. If it hits a human, it makes a peculiar, thumping sound, like hitting a watermelon."

'Compulsive Warrior'

MITCH WERBELL sounds completely matter-of-fact when he talks about firearms, and death, and with reason. He has been in the military hardware business for years, and he has either heard or produced—or both—the thumping watermelon sound many times—in Latin America and Southeast Asia, in the U.S. armed forces and as a paramilitary "adviser." He is a compulsive warrior, an armed crusader fighting against "ungodly communism."

WerBell is not alone in this occupation, but he practices it in a unique manner. Most soldiers of fortune are nothing else, and they live from one little war to the next, brawling and boozing their way through a tough and financially unrewarding life.

WerBell, by contrast, is a businessman who dabbles in military adventure only when and as far as it suits him. If combat didn't titillate him, he wouldn't partake of it. His business is supplying weapons, not using them in anger. He specializes in the weapons and techniques of counterinsurgency, which may be roughly defined as the forceful suppression of coups d'etat, rebellions and the like.

The way WerBell operates, this means defending established regimes, some of them dictatorships, against armed revolt. This political posture not only does not trouble WerBell, it pleases him. "I have no objection to dictatorship if it serves the interests of the country," he says. Particularly if the threat to those interests is from the left: "Communism has no place in the Western Hemisphere—or in any hemisphere. I am totally opposed to it,

and to the spread of ideological germs and filth that it brings."

Now and again, WerBell's name pops into the news. The first issue of the new muckraking magazine, Scanlan's, carried an exhaustive story on CBS's involvement in an abortive invasion of Haiti in 1966, and WerBell was credited with a major, if uncertain, role in the operation. (WerBell was arrested and indicted after the fiasco, but charges against him were dropped, while six others arrested were brought to trial. Asked by a friend for an explanation, WerBell replied jauntily, "When you work for the company, they take care of you. I'll never hear another word about it." So far he hasn't, he maintains.)

Last December, WerBell hit the front page of *The Atlanta Constitution* when a shipment of captured enemy weapons bound from Vietnam was detained at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. A national columnist conjectured that WerBell or his friends meant to distribute the weapons to right-wing extremist groups in the U.S. WerBell angrily denies that. They were souve-

nir weapons given to him by friendly forces in Vietnam, he said, and they were shipped to the States for display in military museums.

Not surprisingly, WerBell has often been called an operative of the Central Intelligence Agency, a charge that angers him only when it is leveled too vehemently. It is not that he has anything against the CIA. He just doesn't, he says, happen to be one of its boys. His paramilitary work, which consists of advising and sometimes directly assisting foreign governments, is done in the employ of what he calls "an independent group of well-intentioned, patriotic Americans." The Birch Society? The Minutemen? A bunch of far-right Texas millionaires? WerBell won't say, other than to insist that it is not the CIA.

It hardly matters, for according to WerBell, it is all in the service not only of freedom and anti-communism but of the U.S. government; he does not supply or advise or fight for regimes not bearing the State Department seal of approval. A heavy percentage of his merchandise goes directly to the U.S. government, which distributes it to its own forces that need silent or exotic weapons. The balance is sold to friendly governments, either directly or through the good offices of the "independent group." He says he does not

sell to individuals, not even if they're certified anticommunists.

WerBell takes pains to point out that he is no ordinary arms broker. That is, he is not one of those shadowy figures who sell weapons to both sides at exorbitant prices or who take possession of contraband shipments on the high seas.

"We've always adhered to a basic policy: There is only one friend of the United States in a given area, and we deal only with that friend."

What does WerBell peddle? A range of firearms from machine guns to desk-sized cannons, from the meanest-looking weapons to innocent looking swagger sticks that fire a bullet or even a small rocket; an array of techniques — "systems," he calls them — that will help an American soldier or a foreign army hold off insurgent forces, and occasionally, his personal services.

These services present WerBell at his most shadowy. Serving as a combatant in the armed forces of a foreign nation is against U.S. law, and WerBell is understandably reluctant to admit having done so. He describes himself in such terms as "paramilitary" and "adviser," but acquaintances suspect he has been in the thick of the fighting a number of times. He may even have zapped an insurgent or two.

Corporate Setup

THE HEADQUARTERS for his work, the former Dobbs estate, is on Highway 360 just outside of Powder Springs in a remote section of Cobb County. Actually, corporate headquarters is in Washington, in a firm called Environmental Industries, Inc.—a neat euphemism for a company dedicated to killing people. Environmental Industries, WerBell says, is bankrolled by some of the East's most prominent investment houses; he is its director of international operations. He is also president of a subsidiary called Military Armaments Co., Inc., and because he is in Powder Springs, Military Armaments is there, too. (Behind Environmental Industries, WerBell says, is "a third shadow of which E.I. is a subsidiary"—another tantalizing hint of the CIA.)

Military Armaments may well be a unique American enterprise. Nobody else, WerBell says, is in the business of designing special purpose weapons on such a scale. A good deal of its designing and manufacturing is done under federal license. Silencers, for example, are outlawed by the National Firearms Act, along with sawed-off shotguns, submachine guns and other vestiges of Prohibition era gangland

wars.

To manufacture his suppressors, WerBell must pay a special tax of \$500 a year, collected by the Treasury Department. The T-men also check periodically to see that his awesome collection of firearms—over 200 individual pieces—is properly registered. Apparently the market for suppressors is not very large because, according to WerBell, his firm is the only one authorized to manufacture them.

WerBell will not discuss the sales or profits of Military Armaments except to say that, after two years of extensive research and development (resulting in "a tax loss of a half million dollars"), the company is now doing very well. It has about 12 employees, including four machinists who work under the direction of Gordon Ingram, who has charge of the design operation and whose name is on the Model 11 submachine gun that young Mitch demonstrated on the firing range.

'Cottage Industry'

INGRAM WORKS in a well-equipped machine shop-lab attached to the main house on the estate, which WerBell likes to call "the farm." WerBell's office is next door to the shop. Its walls are so loaded with weapons that it is a wonder they do not collapse. There are knives and spear guns and pistols and rifles and machine guns, dozens and dozens of them, some purchased, some won in combat, some presented by the appreciative recipients of WerBell's counterinsurgency techniques.

WerBell, who has a sense of humor, calls his enterprise a "cottage industry" and likens himself to "a country doctor . . . I can fall out of the living area upstairs right down to the office." Upstairs is the domain of his German-born wife Hildegard, a pleasant, gray-haired woman who has borne

WerBell six children and put up with his rather unusual way of life. (When he left for the Far East in 1968, he said he'd be gone for a year or more, and he was.)

A Military Profile

MITCHELL WERBELL is a short, wiry man of 52, quick with a quip and quite sensible until he begins talking about communism or other social issues. He has the face and bearing of a Prussian officer, an image he cultivated by wearing a mustache and occasionally a monocle. He often dresses in military clothing of indeterminate origin, and he embellishes the image by talking in slightly clipped sentences peppered with military phrases. There is nothing phony in this. WerBell has a strong attachment to weapons and to warfare, and he has been around them so long that the ideas and styles they foster are an ingrained part of his personality.

He comes by both his militarism and his anticommunism honestly. His father was an officer in the Russian Imperial army, even though he was born in the United States. "It was a tricky situation," says Mitch. "He was a citizen of both the U.S. and Russia. In those days you could do that."

The elder WerBell fought against the Bolsheviks, but before the collapse of the czarist regime he wisely secured an appointment as liaison officer between the Russian and American forces—stationed in the U.S. He lived in this country for the rest of his life, putting his early medical training to use in cancer research.

A legacy from father is Mitch's barely disguised aristocratic sympathies. He has been quoted as saying, "Communism is a substitution of a peasant dictatorship over the aristocracy—I prefer the aristocracy." He is without question an elitist. Not surprisingly, his elite is composed of superpatriots and military men.

Mitchell WerBell was born in Pennsylvania, shortly after his Russian-American father and his Scottish-born mother arrived in the U.S. at the end of World War I. His parents traveled a good deal, here and abroad, and Mitch traveled with them, picking up his education as he went. He got a degree in journalism from the University of Pennsylvania. In World War II, he joined the OSS, and served with a unit behind Japanese lines in China, rising to the rank of captain and acquiring a taste for guerrilla-type warfare he would never lose.

WerBell moved to Atlanta shortly after the war and went to work in ad-

vertising in a department store. Soon he was head of the department, and soon after that he went on his own.

In the mid-'50s, WerBell pulled out of his agency and then formed his own public relations firm. "I'd already been drifting into international PR," WerBell says, "using my family background. I had tremendous contacts in Europe, and I moved into the Far East, too." How much of this moving in was military, WerBell won't say, but his business took on more and more of what he calls a "geopolitical" flavor.

Before long, he was dabbling in Latin American dictatorships. "Before Fidel took over in Cuba, we were working closely with Batista." He adds with a grin, "Our function was to keep Batista in power, although the U.S. government was looking favorably on Fidel at that point."

From all this, even WerBell doesn't know exactly how, came a passionate concern about communism. "I decided to devote whatever time I could to anticommunist activities," he says. "At first it was sort of a hobby, but then it became my main drive in life. What I'm doing now"—here he gestures at the arsenal on his office walls—"affords me a damned good living. But the living is not why I do it."

The Heart of It

IN 1948, WHILE anticommunism was still a hobby, albeit a paying hobby, WerBell purchased the Dobbs estate. He installed rudimentary design facilities and began experimenting with weapons of counterinsurgency, weapons he believed had the best chance of preventing Communist takeovers in the small, underdeveloped nations of Asia and Latin America. "I realized that in counterinsurgency, the primary problem was a lack of depth in weaponry. People say, 'Win the hearts of the enemy, and you'll win the fight.' That's a lot of bull. The best way to get their hearts, if they're the enemy, is to shoot 'em and cut the hearts out."

While he experimented with weapons—quietly, to avoid problems with the federals—WerBell proceeded with his personal brand of geopolitics. He made himself available to anticommunist regimes that wanted help in fighting off one band of insurgents or another. In the process, he became friendly with a number of Latin America's political strongmen. They were delighted to discover a Nore-American who felt as they did about the need for stable, anticommunist regimes, especially their regimes, and

who had both the savvy and the guts to help preserve them.

His first major paramilitary operation was in the Dominican Republic during the 1965 revolt. He was, of course, on the side of the government, which was fending off allegedly Communist insurgents; the United States was on its side, too. WerBell wound up in the midst of the fighting. He was the second Dominican government man to reach the Ozama River, scene of the major battle.

Ellsworth Bunker, then U.S. ambassador to the Organization of American States, became highly exercised over WerBell's activities and his hawkish views on the conflict (WerBell opposed a cessation of hostilities and establishment of a coalition government). Bunker considered trying to toss WerBell out of the country, but nothing came of it. WerBell's "independent group"—CIA, Texas millionaires or whatever—saw to that.

WerBell was already active in the anti-Castro movement, and he brought to it a sense of dash and discipline that the ragtag, bickering bunch of Cuban exiles had seldom seen. Perhaps his major anti-Castro exploit was a speedboat foray into Camarioca, on Cuba's southern coast. The mission was to drop a swimmer, apparently a spy, offshore, and to pick up the family of an exile leader. The boat, flying the Confederate flag on the radio antenna, foundered in high seas, and the raiding party was captured. The Cubans, the story goes, did not know what to make of the brash WerBell, and he and his pals wound up stealing a Castro boat and spiriting some 16 anti-Castroites out of the country before they themselves returned to the United States.

Vietnam Superhawk

IN THE LATE '60s, WerBell turned his attention to Southeast Asia. He is, of course, a superhawk on Vietnam, and would be happy if the U.S. were also fighting communism in all its neighboring countries. He was in Thailand, "working closely with the supreme command," for months, promoting the sales of his weapons and systems. "I showed them things like surveillance equipment and night vision equipment, stuff that lets you surprise the hell out of the bastards." Did he do any fighting himself? WerBell chuckles. "I ain't supposed to be shooting the stuff, just demonstrating how to shoot it."

Three years ago, WerBell's weapons business became promising enough for him to go into it full time. He organized a firm called Sionics (for Studies

in Operational Negation of Insurgency and Countersubversion, tied in with Environmental Industries, and began in earnest to develop a line of military hardware. Sons Mitch IV and Geoff became integral parts of the firm. Mitch IV was already a bona fide counter-insurgent. As a 15-year-old, he had spent considerable time with Dad in the Dominican Republic, specializing in underwater probing for safe landing sites. Geoff, two years younger, barely missed out on a Cuban foray; his father took him to Miami a few years ago, but the plans fell through.

One day I sat in WerBell's office as Geoff displayed a number of Military Armament's most unusual weapons. He brought out "the Stinger," a cigar-shaped tube three inches long, weighing 2½ ounces, that fires a .22-caliber cartridge. Nothing visible suggests a gun, and the bullet, on its way out, dislodges a thin plug that disguises the hole at the end of the tiny barrel. WerBell commends the Stinger to secret agents who get caught with the goods and must take "the last resort," that is, shoot themselves.

In the same exotic category is the swagger stick, bound in leather, with silver studs. By pushing between two studs, one can fire a .22 or, with a special model, a small rocket. The bodyguard of Dominican strongman Gen. Antonio Imbert used the rocket model to blast would-be assassins a few years ago. Then there is a small, brass-fitted cannon. It makes a handsome knick-knack for a soldier-politician's desk. It fires, with one simple finger movement, a bullet that will quiet an unruly visitor. More traditionally military is WerBell's "special long-range knocker-outer," a redesigned Remington 9-millimeter rifle that "will plug 'em in the eye at 200 meters."

The bulk of WerBell's business is in sound suppressors and Ingram Model submachine guns. Suppressors can be used on large as well as small weapons, and in fact have been used effectively on the wicked-looking Vulcan machine guns mounted on American helicopters in Vietnam. The Australian Army Journal ran a story calling the Sionics suppressor "superior to anything previously used . . . (with it) it is now possible for the sniper to fire from relatively short ranges, especially when using subsonic projectiles."

WerBell is so enthusiastic about the Ingram Model submachine guns (there are two models, taking different sized cartridges) that he predicts they will eventually make "obsolete every individual weapon in the world." The U.S. Army, he says, is now looking care-

fully at the Ingram models with an eye toward making them standard equipment of American soldiers; if that happens, the financial success of Military Armaments will presumably be assured. According to data published by the firms, the Ingram models are shorter, lighter and capable of delivering more firepower than anything on the market. They are also, WerBell says, ideal for secret agents; they fit snugly into a dispatch case (Military Armaments makes the case, too), complete with suppressor and six magazines.

Business Is Business

DOES WERBELL feel a twinge of conscience about providing the world with such deadly and efficient weapons? No. "I see no reason to be concerned," he says. "We're supplying a certain product that is unfortunately a part of the civilized world. As long as people exist, there's going to be an arms business. I don't see much difference between our supplying arms to combatants and a surgical supply house supplying gauze to bind up the wounds inflicted."

There is his anticommunist argument, too. WerBell is fighting the Communist menace; it is a fight that must be won and weapons are needed to win it.

Contrary to cynical opinion, Powder Springs was not named in honor of WerBell and his enterprise. WerBell, in fact, stays as aloof from the local community as possible. His house is so well-stocked, it is practically self-sufficient save for occasional trips to the grocery and liquor stores. There has been, from time to time, anti-WerBell feeling in Powder Springs. WerBell declares, "The hell with it. Who cares? I tell 'em I'm prepared to purchase their property if they don't like the area."

He does not suffer from loneliness, however. There is a steady stream of visitors and customers, foreigners as well as Americans. A few weeks ago WerBell's son-in-law, an Air Force lieutenant colonel, flew in from Ohio, mainly to see what was new around the shop; he hadn't been in several months, he said, "and things change awfully quickly around here." The day I was there, the colonel and WerBell swapped ideas on ridding the State Department of no-win policy makers and on bringing the enemy to its knees, or its grave, in Vietnam.

WerBell recalls with relish one particular visitor. He came from the State Department a few years back, and according to WerBell, he said, "The functions of the foreign policies of the United States are the business of the

State Department in Washington, not of Mitchell WerBell in Powder Springs, Georgia." WerBell's reply? "You can't print it. It was all in Anglo-Saxon words." But that was the old, swashbuckling WerBell. The new, low-profile WerBell says with a grin, "My present policy is that I agree with that theory completely. Period."

If actions to the contrary speak too loudly, they, like WerBell's weapons, can always be suppressed by the man himself. Meanwhile, Mitch and his "independent group" march on.

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Mitchell WerBell dresses the part at his private arsenal in Georgia, where he makes specialized light weapons for the U.S. Army and other counterinsur-

gency forces around the world. Beside him is his son, Geoff. The braces were only temporary, while WerBell recovered from a leg injury.