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SOLDIERS OF MISFORTUNE

By Phil Gailey
and David Shribman
Washington Star Staff Writers

Second of a Series

'General' Teaches How to Kill and t

Ex-Mercenary Runs Ga. Survival School

POWDER SPRINGS, Ga. — Six young men gathered around Lucky McDaniel, a former Georgia tobacco salesman turned master marksman, and listened carefully to his opening lecture on "instinct shooting."

"It comes from the non-thinking side of the brain," ex-

plained McDaniel, an easygoing man who can splatter a fly at 20 paces with a BB gun. "Don't think about aiming, squeezing the trigger or any of that. Just keep your eye on the target and shoot."

Within minutes, McDaniel had his students hitting a penny in midair with a BB gun. Later in the day they were doing just as well with pistols, rifles and shotguns. They had mastered "quick-kill."

This was opening day for a new class at Cobray International, which has evolved from a commando training center in the 1960s into a counterterrorism and survival school in the '80s. At the end of their 10-day course, the six young men — ranging from a long-haired bail bondsman to a former Marine who wants to be a bodyguard — were expertly schooled in the deadly arts.

"We teach people to kill and hurt," says the school's headmaster, Mitchell Livingston Werbell III, a flamboyant soldier of fortune who combined the cobra and the eel to come up with the school's symbol.

It's about that simple. When students leave Cobray they can do both — expertly. All kinds of people — international business executives, bodyguards, law enforcement officials, doctors, lawyers and their wives — come here to learn self-defense skills and, as the curriculum suggests, much more.

For 53,000 students get the works — 10 days of instruction by former Green Berets and mercenaries in "quick-kill" shooting, martial arts, map reading, evasive driving, convoy security, hostage negotiations, scuba diving, terror psychology, medical trauma treatment, photo interpretation, intelligence gathering, risk analysis, site security, escape and evasion techniques, and more.

They are taught to kill by throwing knives, screwdrivers and scissors. They learn how to make their own weapons from glass, barbed wire, rusty can lids, rocks and sharp sticks.

The Cobray school is located on Werbell's 66-acre estate of pine trees and ponds in this Atlanta suburb. There is an electronically operated security fence, and visitors are well-advised to pick up the phone at the entrance gate to ask for an escort. Otherwise, they will find themselves negotiating with Werbell's pets — Dobermans, Great Danes and an Alsatian named Lex, who has a habit of biting strangers on the buttocks.

From the highway, Werbell's farm looks tranquil enough. At noontime chimes are pealing hymns of peace and love from a nearby church steeple. Neighbors tend their gardens and children play in the fields. But suddenly the pastoral serenity is shattered by the sound of gunfire and piercing battle commands. It is no wonder shell-shocked neighbors call Werbell's place "Gunpowder Springs."

To understand Cobray requires an understanding of Werbell, who founded the school partly as a playground for his fantasies.

He likes to strut around in a red beret and military fatigues, sometimes even in a kilt, and nearly always with a swagger stick clamped under his arm. He wears the three stars of an Afghan general on his shoulders and a Vietnam Ranger patch on his sleeve. His guardsman mustache adds the final touch.

That is Werbell in uniform — a stumpy, ruddy-cheeked man who traces his "warrior" blood through 1,200 years of Russian ancestry.

...terrycloth bathrobe that exposed a pale, hairless chest and a puffy, aging body.

At 63, he looks more like the cancer patient he is than the flamboyant soldier of fortune. (he hates that term, preferring to call himself "just a f— professional soldier") he has been.

Werbell, who has prostate cancer, says he was supposed to be dead by now, but he boasts that he isn't cooperating. He is still swashbuckling about, reliving past glories and dabbling in foreign intrigue.

He enjoys showing visitors the dozens of rosaries and hundreds of guns — including a three-barreled hunting rifle Hermann Goering gave him in 1933 — he has collected over the years.

In his work, he says, you need both.

This is the former department store advertising executive who became bored with the pursuit of a normal life, the man who came up with the idea of the Handy Pandy plastic diaper cover before taking his own life undercover.

Werbell "drifted off into the smoke" nearly a quarter of a century ago and became a clandestine operative. His inventions turned deadly after that.

He is likely to be remembered not so much for his plastic diaper cover as for his "whispering death" weapon. He is known as the father of the M-10 machine gun. It is not much bigger than a .45 pistol and comes with what is regarded as the world's best silencer, which Werbell designed. This deadly spiffire "whispers" death at the rate of a thousand bullets a minute.

Werbell is something of a caricature of the soldier of fortune — a paramilitary peacock among his kind. He is raucous and boozy, cunning and colorful. He has a taste for guest quarters in foreign palaces, private jets, single-malt Scotch from the Isle of Islay, elephant-skin gun cases, wolfhounds and silver-topped sword canes. He drops the names of kings and dictators like candy wrappers.