

# Forsyth: Soldiers must get greater protection from the law for 'mercy killings'

By Patrick Foster

SOLDIERS who engage in acts of mercy killing should be afforded greater protection from prosecution, Frederick Forsyth, the novelist and former RAF fighter pilot, has said.

Forsyth, one of the leading lights in the campaign to free a marine jailed for murdering a wounded Taliban fighter, called for a "serious public debate" on mercy killing, after two former marines told how they had taken the lives of wounded men beyond help.

The author of *The Day of the Jackal* recalled how he had watched a man who had been shot in the head "twitch for a minute", while covering the Biafran War as a journalist in the late 1960s. He said: "I would never condemn anyone who puts someone out of their misery. We do it in hospitals all the time, we turn off life support machines, finishing the job for people who cannot survive and are in incredible pain. If it's done in a hospital by a man in a white coat, it's fine. But on a battlefield, apparently it's murder. There are times when it is bloody obvious that a man cannot survive."

Forsyth is one of the leading



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activists in the campaign to free Alexander Blackman, who has spent more than three years in prison after being convicted of murdering a mortally wounded Taliban fighter by shooting him in the chest. Sgt Blackman has maintained that he believed the insurgent was dead when he shot him, a belief that a leading pathologist consulted by his appeal team, Dr Ashley Fegan-Earl, now says was reasonable.

Neal Ascherson, journalist and author, reignited public debate this week, revealing that while serving as a marine in the Malayan emergency in 1952, he shot two badly wounded in-

surgeants to "put them out of their misery". A second marine, Lieutenant-Colonel Ewen Southby-Tailyour OBE, also disclosed that in 1968 he had given his own mortally wounded sergeant-major a lethal morphine overdose.

Forsyth said: "Lots of military men have said to me that it's happened for years with a nudge and a wink, and it's just accepted. But legally it's no defence and we need to have a serious public debate about it."

The novelist recalled how, as a correspondent covering the Nigerian Civil War, he witnessed a Biafran major being shot in the head. He said: "He'd taken a bullet through the forehead. In the movies there's always a neat bullet hole, almost like it's been drilled into the skull. In reality, the pressure of the bullet is far too great for the human head to absorb, so most of his skull had blown away and his brains were running down my cheek. I hit the deck, and he lay a few feet away, twitching for about a minute."

Forsyth is acknowledged by Blackman's family as a key figure in the campaign to free him. His wife, Claire, said: "We would be nowhere without Freddie."