

Counter-Insurgency Against ‘Kith and Kin’? The British Army in Northern Ireland, 1970-1976

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Edward Burke completed his PhD thesis at the University of St. Andrews in 2015. His doctoral research was on the experiences and cohesion of small British Army infantry units in the early years of Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. Prior to embarking on his doctoral research, Edward was Deputy Head of the International Police Coordination Board in Kabul, Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012. He is also currently an Associate Fellow at FRIDE, a European foreign policy think in Brussels. Edward has lectured at the Royal United Services Institute, Chatham House in London and the Naval Postgraduate School in the United States. His publications include ‘Flying into the Unknown: Ireland’s contribution to the United Nations Mission in the Congo (ONUC)’ in Michael Kennedy and Deirdre McMahon (eds.), *Obligations and Responsibilities: Ireland and the United Nations, 1955-2005* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration and the Department of Foreign Affairs); ‘Europe’s role in the stabilisation of Iraq’, in Richard Youngs (ed.), *Idealism at Bay: Trends in European Democracy Promotion*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2010) and ‘Leaving the Civilians Behind: The “Soldier-Diplomat” in Afghanistan and Iraq, *PRISM – National Defense University* 1/2 (2010). Edward was awarded a BA

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Short Abstract

This article argues that there was considerable divergence among infantry units during the early years of Operation Banner (1969-1976). The Army struggled to adapt to soldiering in the UK – the British government quickly made clear that colonial measures were unsuitable in a domestic context. Some units accepted this new logic; others engaged in deviancy, determined to punish the local population from which the IRA drew its support. The Army's senior leadership failed to prevent such divergence.

Abstract

This article argues that state violence in Northern Ireland during the period 1970-1976 - when violence during the Troubles was at its height and before the reintroduction of the policy of police primacy in 1976 - was on a greatly reduced scale than that seen in British counterinsurgency campaigns in the colonies after the Second World War. When the Army attempted to introduce measures used in the colonies – curfews, internment without trial – these proved to be extremely damaging to London's political aims in Northern Ireland, namely the conciliation of the Catholic minority within the United Kingdom and the defeat of the IRA. However, the insistence by William Whitelaw, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1972-1972), on 'throttling back' – the release of internees and the imposition of unprecedented restrictions on the use of violence by the Army – put a serious strain on civil-military relations in Northern Ireland. The relatively stagnant nature of the conflict - with units taking casualties in the same small 'patch' of territory without opportunities for the types of 'positive actions' seen in the colonies - led to some deviancy on the part of small infantry units who sought informal, unsanctioned ways of taking revenge upon the local population. Meanwhile, a disbelieving and defensive attitude at senior levels of command in Northern Ireland meant that informal punitive actions against the local population were often not properly investigated during 1970-1972, until more thorough civilian and military investigative procedures were put in place. Finally, a separation of ethnic and cultural identity between the soldiers and the

local population - despite being citizens of the same state - became professionally desirable in order for soldiers to carry out difficult, occasionally distasteful work.

Introduction

On 30 July 1972, the eve of Operation Carcan (part of Operation Motorman) - the British Army's successful occupation of those parts of Derry that had been declared 'No Go' areas for the security forces - 8th Infantry Brigade Headquarters circulated a memorandum to all units in the city. Operation Carcan, it stated, 'must be selective, restrained and highly disciplined ... We are their Army.'¹ The idea that the British Army was the Army of the Catholic people of the Bogside, Brandywell and the Creggan was a fine statement of intent for British soldiers operating 'at home', in the United Kingdom. But in an atmosphere of deep hatred and resentment towards the Army, barely six months after the fatal shooting of 14 unarmed protestors on Bloody Sunday, such ideals quickly wilted under fire. Less than a week after his arrival in Londonderry, the Commanding Officer of 2nd Battalion, Scots Guards, Colonel Tony Boam, wrote that much of Derry was 'rabid Catholic and contains some fairly barbery fellows'.² Lofty aims of 'bringing peace' and 'winning hearts and minds' in Londonderry contrasted with the grubby reality on the ground - a sharp, mutual distain between the soldiers and the local population. Even the name of the Operation - Carcan: 'an iron ring used for a form of public humiliation by exposition at a pole' - suggested a punitive operation rather than one of liberation.³ Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams would later try to draw a direct continuum between operations in Aden and Northern Ireland, part of a concerted attempt to portray Operation Banner - the Army's campaign in Ulster - as simply another rear-guard, punitive, and very 'colonial' war. The Army, Adams argued, was irredeemably anti-Irish, sectarian (at least in the case of Scottish soldiers) and colonial in its mind-set.⁴

This article will make four key arguments: first, it contends that state violence in Northern Ireland was much less than that experienced in the colonies; when colonial counterinsurgent tactics such as curfews or internment without trial were introduced, they generally proved damaging to London's political aims and were quickly rescinded. Nevertheless, the refusal by Britain's political leaders to introduce some form of 'martial law', punitive, colonial-type measures in Northern Ireland caused resentment within the

British Army. Second, the strain of civil-military relations at a senior level was also replicated operationally – as soldiers came to resent the legal limitations of soldiering in the UK. The unwillingness or inability of the Army’s senior leadership to thoroughly investigate and punish serious transgressions of standard operating procedures in Northern Ireland created uncertainty among soldiers over expected behaviour and desired outcomes. Mid-ranking officers and NCOs often played important roles in helping soldiers to adapt to conflict in Northern Ireland. But Headquarters Northern Ireland (HQNI) could mistake overly aggressive groups of soldiers for high-functioning units.

Third, the static, very social conflict in Northern Ireland meant that soldiers became intimately familiar with very small areas, mostly their Company’s ‘patch’ of West Belfast, Londonderry or South Armagh. With mounting casualties - in 1972, 134 British soldiers were killed (108 regular, 26 part-time Ulster Defence Regiment)⁵ - came a widening of the definition of guilt to include the general population of an area from where the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA)⁶ drew its support. Using examples from a number of British Army Regiments, I will argue that the conflict in Northern Ireland developed its own local grammar - small infantry units enjoyed considerable autonomy during the early years of Operation Banner and could behave in a vengeful, highly aggressive or benign and conciliatory way as their local commanders saw fit. A hardening of attitudes towards the local population could occur remarkably quickly – once a unit started taking casualties, in response to the deaths of soldiers from the same Regiment during a previous tour or following reports of an atrocity against soldiers such as the kidnapping and execution of three young Royal Highland Fusiliers on 9 March 1971.⁷ There was a persistent trend of informal punishment of areas by small infantry units without the express sanction, or censure, of senior commanders.

Fourth, the war in Northern Ireland created an imperative for soldiers to establish an emotional separation from the local population. Soldiers often found it more difficult to take the lives of people in what appeared to be a familiar environment, similar to the rest of the UK. A separation of identity became necessary: if the soldier is to do violence, it is better that it is not to his own people. Viewed through this prism, the demonization of the local Irish population is not only due to a resentment of casualties inflicted by the

IRA, but is simultaneously also a way for the soldier to justify actions that he would not want to inflict on his own people or community. Pre-existing cultural differences between English or Scottish soldiers and the local Irish population were far less important factors in explaining anti-Irish rhetoric among soldiers than the urgent need to create separation so that distasteful, otherwise morally questionable, tasks can be carried out.

Uncertain Ground: Adapting to Counterinsurgency in the UK

At the outset of Operation Banner the Catholic Bishop of Derry, Edward Daly, recalled a very 'colonial attitude' during his visits to 8 Infantry Brigade Headquarters in Ebrington, Londonderry. Some of the officers, he observed, knew more about India than Ireland. Later, he recalled, a very different, savvy and 'modern' officer would emerge but the years between 1969 and 1976 was a time of flux.⁸ Senior Northern Irish civil servant Ken Bloomfield also recalled that civil servants posted to Belfast after the introduction of direct rule in March 1972 'approached their task like district commissioners sent out to administer a tribe of rather thick-headed savages'.⁹ A part-time officer from the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) complained that regular Army officers 'look on us as friendly tribesmen'.¹⁰ Colonial attitudes died hard, it seemed – and the Army's initial operations in Northern Ireland did rely upon some measures recently used in the colonies.

In early 1970 the Labour government in London was desperate to avoid getting 'sucked into the Irish bog'. After the riots and sectarian killings that erupted following Northern Irish civil rights protests in the summer and autumn 1969, there was a lull in the violence in the first months of 1970. The Northern Irish government promised a package of local government reforms (to end previous discrimination in favour of Protestants in Ulster) and an economic stimulus from London.¹¹ But the worst was yet to come: another round of sectarian rioting was triggered by contested Orange Order marches in Belfast - an early challenge for the new Conservative government in London that took office under Prime Minister Ted Heath in June 1970. A prolonged gun battle on 27 June 1970 in the Catholic Short Strand enclave of predominantly Protestant East Belfast saw IRA volunteers defending St. Matthew's church and the surrounding area from a Loyalist mob. Irish diplomats visiting Belfast reported that this was a critical watershed - for the IRA and the British Army. The IRA had now emerged as the principal defenders of beleaguered

Catholic areas from Loyalist violence - after months of sectarian riots in which Catholics had suffered most.¹²

From Peacekeeping to Counter-Insurgency

Instead of focusing on why the Army had failed to protect the Short Strand, a decision was taken by military leaders to go on the offensive against those who were now newly-seen as that area's defenders. A curfew and search of the Falls Road in early July was the first major step in this departure from more conciliatory tactics. It was a disaster: the Army found 106 weapons, 250 lbs. of explosives but the rough tactics of the Army; 'the destruction of homes and sacred objects, and acts of abuse and intimidation' had a devastating effect on local attitudes. Many residents were angry at the weapons seizures, claiming these were necessary to defend vulnerable Catholic areas that the Army had proved incapable of protecting.¹³

Some Army officers welcomed a chance to take on both wings of the Republican movement - a split had occurred in the IRA at the end of 1969, leading to the emergence of the Marxist Official IRA (OIRA) and the Provisionals (IRA). The latter steadily increased its support, partly due to its more fervent commitment to escalating the armed campaign, out-stripping the Officials by late 1971. They found the barricades and deal making with local 'defence committees' too much to bear, an offence to UK sovereignty.¹⁴ But Ted Heath balked at the Catholic and international reaction to the Falls Road Curfew, and insisted that the Army seek Cabinet approval for such operations in the future.¹⁵

The previous Labour government had been determined to keep a firm grip on Army strategy for Northern Ireland. Labour also had a natural mistrust of the Ulster Unionist Party, which was politically close to the Conservative Party. A Joint Security Committee (JSC) had been created in Belfast to coordinate operations between the police and the Army. However, the power of veto over new, tougher security operations resided with London. Home Secretary Jim Callaghan showed a keen interest in the workings of the JSC. But, with a change in government in June 1970, the new Home Secretary Reginald Maudling and the Defence Secretary, Lord Carrington allowed the Northern Irish

government greater discretion over security policy. Senior Army officers became more responsive to the new Northern Irish Prime Minister Brian Faulkner who oversaw the drawing up of internment lists and supervised the activities of the Royal Ulster Constabulary's Special Branch.¹⁶

Operation Demetrius

Faulkner's increasingly urgent appeals to the British government to put internment without trial into effect eventually paid off. 'Operation Demetrius' – the round of suspects for possible internment - began on 5 August 1971. The overwhelming majority of internees were suspected Catholic members of paramilitary groups. According to a later Northern Ireland Office report, internment, and the manner in which people were arrested (often in the middle of the night, doors smashed in and homes upended) saw a further deterioration in relations between the Catholic community and the Army. Interrogation techniques were often brutal, involving 'stress positions', later condemned as 'inhumane' by the UK courts. Although some intelligence was undoubtedly gained from questioning suspects, many mistaken arrests were made due to a lack of good intelligence.¹⁷

Sectarian attacks also escalated in the immediate aftermath of internment - in six weeks more than 2,000 families abandoned their houses as a direct result of the violence that broke out on 9 August 1971. A campaign of civil disobedience began on 16 August 1971 and approximately 200 Catholics resigned from the already overwhelmingly Protestant part-time UDR. Internment and Bloody Sunday - the fatal shooting of 14 unarmed civilians on 30 January 1972 - had a catastrophic effect on the public image of the Army among Northern Ireland's Catholic population and saw a surge in recruits for the IRA. By March 1972, 2,989 people had been arrested under the Internment Act, of whom 732 were eventually interned.¹⁸ Later that month, following the further deterioration of the security situation in the wake of the Bloody Sunday shootings, Prime Minister Ted Heath decided to act, telling Northern Ireland's Prime Minister Brian Faulkner that London would pass a bill to cede powers over law and order to London. Faulkner 'made clear his view that a transfer of law-and-order powers would leave no credible basis of viable government...'¹⁹

At the end of March 1972 Heath introduced direct rule, dissolved Northern Ireland's government and appointed William Whitelaw as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Heath, a naturally suspicious and prickly man, trusted Whitelaw, calling him 'one of the most skilful and dependable men in politics'.²⁰ Many Unionists, not least Faulkner, were appalled that Heath had stripped Stormont of its powers. Others were more optimistic believing that Major Whitelaw, an ex-Scots Guards officer, who had won a Military Cross for bravery in Normandy during World War II and served on counter-insurgency operations in Palestine in late 1940s, would now introduce a more conventional internal security campaign such as had been seen in the colonies. The Earl of Enniskillen - an influential peer who had been a senior officer in the Kenya Police Reserve during the Mau Mau rebellion and helped negotiate Kenyan independence before returning to County Fermanagh and serving as a Major in the UDR (4th Battalion) - wrote a memorandum for Whitelaw. In it he congratulated the new SSNI on his appointment, before urging him to look to colonial tactics, including allowing the RUC to take their place in 'the total war machine ... a system of integration such as we had abroad and which proved very efficient and effective'.²¹

The IRA believed that the introduction of direct rule was a clear indication that they had the Army on the back foot. Encouraged, the IRA's campaign of violence escalated further. Northern Ireland pitched into a maelstrom of violence: in the four months after March 1972, 600 bombs were detonated in Northern Ireland, 2,057 people injured, and 192 murdered. In the month of March security forces recorded 399 shooting incidents. By July this figures had risen to 2,718.²² Despite the rising violence and the intense pressure from Unionists – and many Conservatives - to mount a forceful response, Whitelaw, ex-Scots Guards and 'booming with bonhomie', adopted a more low-key approach. He began releasing large numbers of internees over the protests of senior Army officers. He opened negotiations with both the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA – the former announcing a ceasefire that effectively ended their military operations.²³ Negotiations with the Provisional IRA fared badly – Provisional over-reach and the political damage of such fruitless negotiations convinced Whitelaw that a tougher approach would have to be taken. The events of Bloody Friday on July 21, a series of IRA bombs in the city centre of Belfast that killed 11 and seriously injured 130, also had a profound effect on

Whitelaw. He was deeply angry but he also saw a political opportunity, 'It was important to achieve as much as possible by military action while the feelings of revulsion caused by Friday's explosions remained.'²⁴ The Army believed that such action was long overdue.²⁵ But Whitelaw, the consummate political operator, understood that timing is everything.

Operation Motorman

Operation Motorman (or Operation Carcan in Derry) began on July 24 1972 in Belfast and on the morning of July 31 1972 in Londonderry. Motorman was the largest single operation by the British Army in Northern Ireland and successfully brought to an end the IRA 'No-Go' areas, inserting an Army presence into Republican areas that allowed for the better collection of intelligence and monitoring of terrorist suspects. The operation saw military force levels rise to over 28,000. Infantry soldiers were supported by armour including Armoured Fighting Vehicles and a troop of Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers (AVREs) to dismantle the barricades in Derry and elsewhere.²⁶ At a minimum, Motorman gave the impression that the British government was willing to stay the course against the IRA. According to the Derry political activist, Eamonn McCann, Operation Motorman was successful, in part, due to a wave of revulsion over IRA attacks and because the Stormont government was gone: 'Had the Army moved in before direct rule it is certain that thousands of people would have come out to face them, guns or no guns. Now, however, the detested Stormont was gone.'²⁷

Leading Conservative Party and Ulster Unionist Party members applauded Operation Carcan in Londonderry and the wider Operation Motorman to retake the 'No Go areas' in urban areas in Northern Ireland. Within the Army these Operations came as a welcome relief; an opportunity to get on the front foot after months of military inertia against an emboldened IRA due to political considerations many could not fathom or agree with.²⁸ But what was to come next? British political representatives and an older generation of soldiers – such as General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland (GOC) Lieutenant-General Harry Tuzo - who had served on many 'internal security' operations in the colonies now wanted a return to 'tried and tested tactics' such as had been seen in the colonies. The Army had previously proposed introducing some form of 'martial law' in

early July 1972.²⁹ At a meeting on 29 August 1972 there was a terse discussion between the GOC, General Tuzo, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw:

The GOC said that the Army was suffering casualties, which compared unfavourably with other internal security operations such as those in Borneo and Kenya, but without the special processes of law which had enabled effective action to be taken against terrorists in those theatres. Accurate sniper fire was particularly worrying as his troops felt that they were presenting sitting targets without the will on the part of the authorities to retaliate against the known enemy.³⁰

Tuzo accused Whitelaw of putting his troops in danger by winding down internment too quickly. According to the GOC, at least 64 former internees released by Whitelaw had returned to active service with the IRA whose ranks now contained between 800 to 1000 active members. Post-Motorman he should reverse this policy. Army morale would deteriorate sharply if new legal powers were not granted the Army to arrest and detain suspected terrorists. He concluded by saying ‘that it was essential for a soldier to have faith in the organization which he served and the time had come to cease acting in a civilised way against an uncivilised enemy’.³¹

Instead of using Motorman as a springboard to a more aggressive military approach, Whitelaw insisted on ‘throttling back’. The Secretary of State’s message was clear – no arrests of IRA members unless they were actively and demonstrably engaged in plotting an attack or they were known to be at the top levels of the organization. Under Whitelaw, Army discretion over arrests was circumscribed. Meanwhile, to the chagrin of the GOC, the Secretary of State continued his policy of releasing the vast majority of internees.³²

Some in the Army agreed with Whitelaw that the days of colonial tactics were over. Writing in 1973 a Royal Military Police Special Investigation Branch officer concluded that, ‘Tactics learnt in other theatres further afield, when imported by the Army into Northern Ireland, have often proved of acute political embarrassment and left a long trail

of litigation, for every military operation and incident is subjected to close political scrutiny...³³ Northern Ireland was very different; deliberate, officially sanctioned acts of coercion were no longer an option. Something had changed – a reality that mid-ranking officers often grasped more quickly than the GOC and other senior officers. Mid-ranking or junior officers and NCOs could respond to this new challenge in two ways: the first was to play by the rules set down by the government and courts - Colonel Paddy Palmer, the Commanding Officer of 1st Battalion, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders concluded that, like it or not, ‘the enemy can only be fought by methods which public opinion at home, and indeed fair minded opinion abroad, finds acceptable’.³⁴ Alternatively, they could engage in unsanctioned acts of retribution and collective punishment (and hope that these would not be discovered, or would be ignored, by their superiors).

Divergences could even exist within the same Battalion. Major David Thomson, Commander of Support Company, 1 Argylls gave a lecture to his brother officers prior to deployment in Northern Ireland entitled, ‘We must eradicate Aden tendencies’.³⁵ Rough tactics employed by the Argylls during the last months prior to the British withdrawal from Aden Crown Colony in 1967 would not work in the UK. But among the NCOs of Delta Company, 1 Argylls there was still ‘a ‘hard core’ in the Battalion that celebrated the ‘atrocious things’ they had done on that operation. Sergeant Stan Hathaway and Corporal John Byrne, 13 Platoon, Delta Company, would later stab to death two Fermanagh men, Andrew Murray and Michael Naan, on 23 October 1972.³⁶ Shifting operational culture took time.

Unit Autonomy, Moral Distancing and Retribution

Company Commanders could exert a unique authority over their respective ‘patches’ in the early years of Operation Banner. Local people knew it; the British Army was by far the most visible arm of the UK government – many requests and complaints would be put ‘to the Major’.³⁷ Major Martin Smith of 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards described his ‘tough but fair’ approach to his ‘patch’ in North Belfast during the summer and autumn of 1973,

When we took over from the Parachute Battalion it was too dangerous to drive down the Old Park Road in Belfast; we could only patrol on foot. I never allowed more than four Irishmen to group together. At night I switched off all street lights with the master key so the IRA couldn't see us. But they had a key too, so switched them on to set up ambushes for us. I twice shot out the lights, just as we shot at petrol bombers ... I was known as the Reverend Bastard.³⁸

Smith used to systematically 'tear up' a house if the IRA used it as sniping position – walls were knocked in, floor boards removed and the garden dug up using Royal Engineer mechanical diggers. Technically all this might be dressed up merely as a legitimate search, but: 'The locals soon got the message.'³⁹ Major Smith's rather punitive approach to Ardoyne/the Old Park Road area was by no means government policy or Army strategy. But he was very much in charge.

Small groups of soldiers might also clash with any other group of young men, including Loyalists, seeking to dominate what they thought to be their 'patch'. Contrary to the Republican allegations of inherent 'Orange bigotry' and sectarian tribalism, Catholic and Protestant Scottish soldiers would unquestioningly work together against all such challengers, who would occasionally be mocked and ridiculed.⁴⁰ In a hostile, confusing environment, the only people a soldier could count on to help him survive were the other members of his unit.⁴¹ Anti-Irish rhetoric was more typical than sectarian abuse – soldiers generally did not want to offend their mates (for example, over a third of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Regiment – recruited from the areas around Glasgow - were Catholics).⁴²

Separating 'Us' From the Irish

Yet, for all the well-documented instances of fire fights and clashes with other groups of young men in Northern Ireland, there are some interesting anomalies in soldiers' behaviour. Soldiers could respond to aggression/to being under fire without much problem. Survival instincts and training drills would kick in reasonably quickly. But when presented with an opportunity to kill an IRA gunman from an unseen position - taking the first shot - many soldiers froze. Sociologist Erella Grassiani, in her work on the Israeli

military in the Occupied Territories, had noted that it is particularly difficult for soldiers to take life when they are operating among a civilian population in a low intensity operation: 'Seeing these people as "individuals" can make it harder for the soldier to carry out work...' ⁴³ Northern Ireland was also, from a social perspective, a much more uneasy conflict than counterinsurgency in a colonial context. A separation of identity became a professional necessity. One officer involved in training Army snipers recalled,

I found the problem was to get guys to shake off the view – 'Am I really right to be doing this between WH Smith and a Marks and Spencers'. And, meanwhile, seeing granny pushing grandchild down the road in a pram. This makes a big difference. All the other places, wherever we had been had been peasant countries where you are in a different country – where natives are natives. Here they are not natives, they are your kith and kin. The topography is exactly as you recognise it at home. Yet you have a rifle in your hands. You are faced with a situation and your first instinct is, 'This can't be happening.' And that takes training and time – it made Ireland such a unique operation. ⁴⁴

An Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders NCO – a decorated Aden and Northern Ireland veteran - briefly left the Army to become a debt collector in his local town of Greenock in the West of Scotland. He found that he could not perform his tasks - he knew these people, he sympathized with them and the idea of using any threats or violence, even in self-defence, was too odious. ⁴⁵ In Northern Ireland - where operations included tasks such as searching houses, restraining women and children and shooting individuals who looked very similar to young men in Scotland, England or Wales - the separation of the Irish from 'us' became a professional aid, excusing actions that might otherwise become morally uncomfortable in the mind of the soldier and cause him to hesitate. Too much familiarity or affinity could be a threat to military performance; too little could lead to atrocity. Finding the balance was immensely challenging. ⁴⁶

An instructive example of a highly adversarial attitude between small groups of soldiers and the wider populace can be discerned in clashes between certain Army units and Loyalist Shankill Road in West Belfast. On 18 October 1972 Loyalist leaders met with

the GOC, General Harry Tuzo, to demand that 1st Battalion, the Parachute Regiment be withdrawn from Loyalist areas. They complained that soldiers from 1 Parachute Regiment had ‘executed’ Robert Johnston, as well as shooting and beating up a number of other local Protestants. On the night of 7 September 1972 Robert Johnston was drunk, wandering up Berlin Street, when he encountered a group of soldiers. One witness described what happened: ‘I went out to see what was happening. I saw the man shouting down at the troops at the bottom of Berlin Street on the Shankill Road. The words I heard him say were, “I run about in my bare feet thirty years ago ... The weak shall inherit the earth.” Then he was shot.’⁴⁷ Another witness in the Shankill Road recalled soldiers driving around the area shouting: ‘Come out and fight like men you Orange bastards, we fucked your wives and daughters and now we will kill you, take down your Union Jacks, you’re nothing but a lot of Irish bastards.’⁴⁸

A similar clash occurred in 1976: when Loyalist paramilitaries sought to challenge the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders for control of the Shankill Road in Belfast in 1976, the response was an all-out escalation by the Argylls. Loyalist paramilitaries were beaten up, UDA clubs were raided and money ‘confiscated’. A Loyalist leader and trade union activist, Hughie Smyth, called the Regiment ‘a highly organized criminal syndicate’ after several soldiers were convicted of stealing from Loyalist-controlled businesses and committing other robberies including on Royal Avenue in the centre of Belfast.⁴⁹ The Argylls in turn generally had a very low opinion of Loyalist paramilitary groups - especially their mimicry of military organisation.⁵⁰

Players, Gentlemen and Crap-Hats

Some soldiers divided infantry Regiments into ‘Players’ and ‘Crap-hats’. ‘Players’ were aggressive Regiments who were willing to bend, or even break, the rules in order to get the job done – and these were often the Regiments who traditionally had most combat experience during the colonial counterinsurgency era (For example Highland Regiments, the Royal Green Jackets, the Parachute Regiment). Or as Brigadier Joe Starling, deputy commander of 3rd Infantry Brigade, put it: ‘Battalions ... divided naturally into “gentlemen”, who kept a low profile and hoped to live a quiet life, and “Players”, who sought to dominate their operational area and to confront the terrorists head on. 1 PARA

was a “Player” Battalion.⁵¹ Lieutenant A.F.N. Clarke, in his memoir about serving as an officer in the Parachute Regiment in Northern Ireland, described the hostility ‘Player’ Battalions’ felt for ‘Crap-hats’: ‘We arrive up at the Glosters, and stand sneering at them. Crap-hats.’⁵² According to Clarke, and a Scots Guards NCO, ‘Player’ units such as the Parachute Regiment and the Royal Green Jackets used ‘Buckshee’ ammunition – rounds soldiers had collected but were not listed as official Army ordnance.⁵³

Although they produced a steady flow of SAS officers, the Foot Guards were sometimes mocked by other Regiments as insufficiently aggressive - ‘gentlemen’.⁵⁴ Scots Guards officers and many NCOs wore their ‘gentlemen’ image with pride. One officer who served in Ballymurphy in late 1971 as part of Left Flank, 1st Battalion, Scots Guards recalled that, “We very gentlemanly. We weren’t kicking in doors unless it was absolutely necessary. Michael Nurton [Company Commander, Left Flank] took the ‘hearts and minds’ approach very seriously.”⁵⁵ 1 Scots Guards approach to patrolling in West Belfast was substantially ‘toned down’ compared to their 2 Parachute Regiment predecessors, who had been involved in a succession of controversial, and fatal, incidents during August 9-11 1971 that became known as the Ballymurphy massacre – a deliberate and wise decision on the part of more cerebral officers such as Major Nurton.

The Army would deny any serious misconduct on Bloody Sunday, even though it was later revealed that the CO of 1 Parachute Regiment Colonel Derek Wilford disobeyed orders from the CO of 8 Brigade, Brigadier Pat MacLellan. Both men were subsequently rewarded for their operational tours in Northern Ireland during 1972. Nothing was wrong, or so it appeared: Wilford received an OBE and MacLellan was promoted to the rank of Major-General.⁵⁶ However, there are examples of officers taking measures to mitigate the behaviour of errant officers or units that were believed to be too violent – despite the non-recognition of any problem on the part of HQNI. For example, Major Tony Wilson, a Light Infantry Company Commander who was deployed to Newry during late 1971, was awarded a Military Cross for his service in Northern Ireland and put on a track to promotion as a Lieutenant-Colonel. He returned to the 3 Brigade area of operations for an emergency tour in early 1972 - the Intelligence Officer of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards recalled his arrival: ‘Major Tony Wilson of A Coy 2LI – “the Beast of Newry” –

reappeared having flown out from UK for an emergency tour. He was promptly told by Brigade on no account to show his face in Newry.⁵⁷ Officially there was no problem; but operationally 3 Brigade knew that Wilson's return would incite the local population, who believed that 2 Light Infantry had behaved in a wilfully violent manner. Brigadier Tony Wilson later refused to cooperate with the Police Service of Northern Ireland Historical Enquiries Team in relation to the killings of three men in Newry in October 1971.⁵⁸

Such behaviour was profoundly contradictory – the Army was rewarding soldiers who had made the situation worse through their actions. One Argyll officer who served in Newry in late 1972 reflected that to win back the population's trust – using violence very selectively - he had to forego any thought of medals; the Army incentive system was self-evidently tilted towards aggression.⁵⁹ A Scots Guards Company Commander in Belfast in 1971 reflected that offensive operations were the last of many priorities for the Army in Northern Ireland: 'The most important thing was public relations, second was intelligence and quite a long way last was the military operation. Not everybody necessarily grasped that order of things straight away. Different Regiments, Battalions took varying amounts of time to adjust.'⁶⁰ One Argyll Company Commander recalled that,

Battalions by and large did what they wanted to do. You were very seldom told what to do by Brigade headquarters. Brigade Headquarters liaised quite closely with the police, passed information down, took information back up and looked over it with the police. Most of them were there for 2 years. They were a different outfit, they were had a nine to five culture. Not far away you had a 24-hour a day Battalion operating according to it's own way of doing things. And each Battalion liked coming in and doing their own thing. This is what happened the Argylls. They came in – didn't like what they saw. And got stuck in.⁶¹

Very different approaches, the aggressive approach exemplified by Colonel Derek Wilford and Major Tony Wilson, and the more cautious instincts of other officers were allowed to co-exist, both tolerated by HQNI – leading to confusion about the Army's aims and methods, not least among the local populace in Northern Ireland.

Giving Some Back: Revenge as a Critical Motivation

Soldiers, particularly junior officers from more sheltered privileged backgrounds, recoiled from the poverty they encountered in Northern Ireland.⁶² Initial shock and even sympathy at the conditions in which some Catholics lived in Northern Ireland gave way to contempt on the part of some units as they suffered increasing casualties on operations in 1971 and 1972. The constant verbal abuse of soldiers took its toll – any perceived weakness (physical appearance, a stutter etc.) would be exploited. One black soldier was called ‘Banana muncher’ by the Derry IRA newspaper and advised to ‘find a tree to hide in’.⁶³

In response, some soldiers began to demonize the Catholic poor as inherently ‘dirty’ or savage – indirectly emphasising a moral or social distance between themselves and the local inhabitants.⁶⁴ Locals were either helping the IRA, or knew who they were, but did nothing to prevent soldiers being killed. Pictures drawn by soldiers showed primitive looking, drunken Irishmen, lurking behind corners with barely concealed guns and bombs along with captions such as, ‘An innocent Irish bystander about to do an honest day’s work.’⁶⁵ An article written in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders’ Regimental magazine, *The Thin Red Line*, offered a prize for a picture of an ‘intelligent Irishman.’⁶⁶ Others now saw the Irish as somehow culturally inferior – one soldier vented his feelings about the ‘backwardness’ of Ireland in a poem,

In Ireland they call themselves heroes
But women there still dress in black
Oh tell me please tell me why heroes
Must always shoot in the back.⁶⁷

Service in Republican or Loyalist areas was often called ‘Paddybashing’. An officer in the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards used to refer to ‘Paddy drives’ – as opposed to a pheasant drive – southwards from Gosford Castle near Markethill towards the border, ‘Indian country’.⁶⁸ Such labelling could create a sense of contempt for the local population with negative consequences for the soldiers’ treatment of local people. One

Argyll and Sutherland Highlander soldier, Lance-Corporal Iain Chestnut of D Company, was particularly known for his verbal abuse of the local population.⁶⁹ Unchecked, he went on to stuff bolts into a gun and fire them at people, including a local man working at a petrol station. He was also later involved in the murders of Michael Naan and Andrew Murray in Fermanagh.⁷⁰

Army casualties, vengeful or extreme acts of violence such as the events of Bloody Sunday, combined with brutal retribution by the IRA on those who ‘collaborated’ with the Army, meant that acts of kindness between soldiers and the local population became increasingly rare between the beginning of 1971 and the end of 1972. Those in Catholic areas who were overtly friendly to soldiers risked ‘tarring and feathering’, torture and possibly death.⁷¹ One 2nd Battalion, Scots Guards officer acknowledged that, after a period of mounting casualties in his Company in September 1972, he turned a blind eye to his soldiers’ punitive actions against the population of the Brandywell. He described how Guardsmen painted offensive slogans on pieces of corrugated iron, hung these from their vehicles and then drove around the Brandywell in the early hours ‘to piss off’ the locals. This led to 3 days of rioting, which, in the view of the officer, was no bad thing – Guardsmen being able to get ‘stuck in’ and let off some steam.⁷²

Upon returning for yet another tour in Londonderry in April 1974, Major Hugh Lockhart, an officer in 1st Battalion, Grenadier Guards, wrote to Bishop Edward Daly, the recently appointed Bishop of Derry. Lockhart confided that it was difficult to get his soldiers to even think about trying to win over the local population. ‘Hearts and minds’ was fine rhetoric but a hard sell to his soldiers in the Creggan and Bogside because of their previous experiences there in 1972 and 1973:

One of the main problems of changing patrolling policy is the bitterness that exists. As you said the people have no confidence in the army after four years, but our soldiers are equally bitter after several years of stoning, shootings, and constant rebuffs, and it will be a hard task to convince and inspire them to put into practice on the ground a policy which we at command level agree is correct...⁷³

Bishop Daly was convinced that the Grenadier Guards were meting out collective, retributive punishment to the general population in Derry and he wrote an angry letter to the GOC, Lieutenant-General Frank King. Other Army units had behaved well prior to the Grenadier Guards arrival; support for the IRA had diminished due to the different approach of other, more restrained units and community leaders. Now months of work was being undone in a few days, or, as he put it to Major Lockhart: ‘Your men are antagonizing a whole population, and you are playing right into the hands of the Provos.’⁷⁴ In a written response to Daly, General King could not conceal his contempt for the Creggan area – the inhabitants were to blame: they knew who the gunmen were and could have thrown them out.⁷⁵

Inexcusable behaviour was excused on the basis that the victims were somehow at fault, a tendency that has been highlighted by Sibylle Scheipers in her work on irregular warfare.⁷⁶ An example of reflexive defensiveness and denial was the attitude of the Commanding Officer of 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, Colonel Peter Morton, who robustly defended a soldier in his Battalion, Private Michael Williams, who shot and killed a twelve year old girl Majella O’ Hare in South Armagh on 14 August 1976. Colonel Morton insinuated that Majella O’Hare’s father may have been (or at least knew who was) the IRA gunman who was alleged by Private Williams to have been in the area: ‘As Majella lay mortally wounded in the road her father appeared from the churchyard where he had been cutting the grass in approximately the area where the GPMG gunner had seen his gunman.’⁷⁷ Majella O’ Hare’s father was the caretaker at the local school and held his daughter while she was dying.⁷⁸ In 2010 the Police Service of Northern Ireland’s Historical Enquiries Team concluded that no IRA gunman had been in the area and that 3rd Battalion, Parachute Regiment’s account of the incident was not credible (Private Williams had been acquitted of manslaughter almost three decades earlier).⁷⁹

Misconduct and Military Justice

General Tuzo was worried about increasing incidents of commanding officers covering up the misdeeds of their soldiers so as to not embarrass their Regiment – a misplaced loyalty of, ‘My soldiers right or wrong’. But he did little to act upon his concerns.⁸⁰ Even in an incident where wrongdoing had, according to Tuzo, undeniably taken place - the

abduction and severe beating of two Legion of Mary workers, Raymond Muldoon and Francis Creagh, by soldiers from 1 Parachute Regiment on 3 February 1972 - Tuzo's wrath focused on the victims, Muldoon and Creagh, because they did not seek Army or RUC assistance to investigate their allegations. 'One is forced', Tuzo wrote, 'to the conclusion that they are more interested in propaganda than in the redress of grievance.'⁸¹

A more considered reflection on why Muldoon and Creagh and other alleged victims of Army maltreatment did not liaise directly with the Army and the police might have considered the following prevailing factors: i) the dangers for residents of areas with a significant Republican presence of cooperating with the Security Forces lest they be intimidated, assaulted or murdered by the IRA and ii) locals may not have had confidence in the desire of the Security Forces to investigate such abuses. Both were legitimate concerns. During the early years of Operation Banner there were a number of barriers towards uncovering the truth behind allegations of bad behaviour on the part of soldiers. First, there was a somewhat pejorative view of the Army towards the population – an underlying assumption that local people inevitably made things up or grossly exaggerated incidents and were not to be believed. There was something 'wrong' with the Irish. The GOC, Harry Tuzo, approvingly quoted the writer Honor Tracy to describe the Irish:

'If anyone lays a finger on them [the Irish] the world must hear of it with embellishment. And like children they believe in their fantasies ... Furthermore, nothing that happens, no action of troops or police, relates in any way to anything done by themselves. Nothing is ever their fault, nor do they ever do wrong.' Because the world at large is unaccustomed to this style of behaviour, complaints and allegations by Irishmen against the Army are apt to shock and disturb...⁸²

Very few soldiers were prosecuted for offences committed in Northern Ireland between 1969 and late 1972. In 1970 the then GOC, General Freeland, concluded an agreement with the Chief Constable of the RUC on the investigative process that should be followed if allegations of misconduct were made against the Army: The Army alone would interview military witnesses, and the RUC would speak to civilians. Only a handful of

cases ever made it to court – according to a Royal Military Police Special Investigations Branch (RMP SIB) Major, this was a ‘honeymoon period’ for the Army,

With both RMP and RUC sympathetic towards the soldier, who after all was doing an incredibly difficult job, he was highly unlikely to make a statement incriminating himself, for the RMP investigator was out for information for managerial⁸³, not criminal purposes, and, using their powers of discretion, it was equally unlikely that the RUC would prefer charges against soldiers except in this most extreme of circumstances.⁸⁴

At the end of 1972 Sir Barry Shaw, the newly appointed Director of Public Prosecutions, effectively revoked RUC discretionary powers, insisting that all allegations against the Army to be passed to him for examination.⁸⁵ By January 1975, the Ministry of Defence had made out of court settlements in 410 cases of alleged abuse, out of an approximate total of 6,000 claims.⁸⁶ And, under scrutiny from Shaw, the RMP SIB were forced to conduct more thorough, ‘normal SIB standard’ inquiries into allegations of excessive force by soldiers.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The preceding article has arrived at four main conclusions: first, attempts to introduce colonial measures – internment, interrogation-in-depth, curfews – proved to be politically disastrous within a UK context. In 1972 senior Army officers in Northern Ireland resented SSNI’s refusal to use colonial-type tools to respond to escalating violence in Northern Ireland.⁸⁸ Whitelaw realised that a military response to IRA violence was not the primary means of victory but it was the main way to lose if implemented incorrectly. Using colonial measures in the UK was neither politically desirable nor legally acceptable: in the short-term Whitelaw preferred to err on the side of exposing the Army to more danger, rather than continuing the politically damaging policy of internment without trial – which had fuelled a rise in support for the IRA. More rigorous investigations into allegations of abuse after 1972 appear to have corresponded with a shift in soldiers’ behaviour; operations and arrests were more selective, interrogations less brutal, intelligence began to improve.⁸⁹ Revulsion at IRA tactics and errors – such as Bloody Friday and the death

of six local men in the Newry Customs bombing of 9 August 1972 – meant that the tide of Catholic public opinion turned against the IRA.⁹⁰ The daily average of shooting incidents showed a drop from 92 in July 1972 to just nine 12 months later.⁹¹

Second, the Army's senior leadership during the early years of Operation Banner could display a disbelieving, even callous attitude to allegations of abuse. HQNI's own attitudes, mirrored at an operational level, were not conducive to good discipline – as soldiers came to regard whole areas through a prism of complicity in the deaths of soldiers. Almost nobody was presumed innocent in the Creggan or the Bogside. Although soldiers were not permitted to engage in official reprisals as on previous colonial campaigns, they could informally punish an area – whether by destroying a house or harassing the inhabitants. A very few went even further – killing unarmed local civilians. Even then, with respect to Bloody Sunday or in the case of Majella O' Hare, HQNI failed to fully investigate the crimes that had been committed.

Third, if unchecked by their officers and NCOs, operations in the Bogside or Crossmaglen could quickly descend into very local confrontations between groups of young men, eager to provoke, escalate and react. Participation in violence was highly desirable, if not status defining.⁹² As in gangs, combat is an initiation for 'real soldiers'. New soldiers were fascinated by 'mythic violence' - 'the legends and stories shared by gang members about their participation in violence'.⁹³ The temptation for cohesive, small units of soldiers - fuelled on a hyper-masculine, aggressive self-image – to challenge rival groups is obvious. The fundamental distinction between gangs and the military is that the military adheres to, and should act on behalf of, the law. Without such restraint and punishment, 'Player' or hyper-invested units - 'unit pride ... so exaggerated that one only respects the members of one's unit' - can come to resemble gangs, out for retribution using methods that go against the standards of the wider institution and state they are supposed to serve.⁹⁴ In the case of the stabbing to death of Michael Naan and Andrew Murray by NCOs from D Company, 1 Argylls, the identity of the perpetrators was only discovered because an ex-Argyll soldier tipped off police almost six years later, concerned that one of the same NCOs was the 'Yorkshire Ripper' – the Argylls were based in the north of England at the time. The soldier did not want Northern Ireland deeds to be replicated at home in Britain

(Interestingly he did not appear to be concerned that they could be repeated by the same soldiers in later Operation Banner tours).⁹⁵

In Northern Ireland Battalions and sub-units had considerable autonomy to shift the tempo of operations as they saw fit – leading to contradictory approaches on part of rotating units. ‘Player’ units that had seen a lot of recent active service in the colonies – such as the Parachute Regiment, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (both of whom served in Aden in 1967) – struggled to adapt to soldiering in a UK environment, to escape the myths and moulding experiences of their previous operations.

Fourth, soldiers’ use of anti-Irish sentiment and, more rarely, sectarian language was a means of retaliation to physical attack and abuse; such abuse was also symptomatic of a perceived need to create some moral distance between soldiers and the local population. Anti-Irish sentiment was indulged in at all levels – and, at least to some degree, mirrored sentiments occasionally heard at home in Britain. But rather than exhibiting entrenched sectarian or anti-Irish attitudes before deployment, soldiers were surprised and very often appalled by the scale of sectarian hatred and violence they encountered in Northern Ireland. Creating a moral distance between them and the local population was partly utilitarian – a soldier does not want to take the life of ‘kith and kin’, better ‘an other’; it took time for soldiers to adjust to the occasional need of taking lives ‘between a WH Smith and a Marks and Spencer’. However, in such an intensely social war, officers struggled to contain and channel their soldiers desire for revenge.

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