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Thursday, 11 September 2008

It was the longest deployment by British forces in modern times, 38 years of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland. More than 300,000 troops took part in the difficult and dangerous mission, nearly 800 died and more than 6,000 were injured.

Yesterday, Baroness Thatcher, whose

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career as premier was played out against the backdrop of the violence, led the tributes at St Paul's Cathedral to the servicemen and women who had served and fallen in the conflict.

Prince Charles, Prince of Wales salutes the march past at the UK Commemorative Service for Northern Ireland Operations at St Paul's Cathedral in London.

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She was joined by Tony Blair, who brokered the Good Friday Agreement, and the Prince of Wales, whose great uncle, Lord Mountbatten, was assassinated by the IRA.

Hundreds of former soldiers and bereaved families attended the service, in which the Bishop of London, Dr Richard Chartres, spoke of how those who took part in the campaign, Operation Banner, had helped to keep the "forces of chaos at bay" and "stood firm... until peace could be achieved".

Dr Chartres told those gathered: "The people of Northern Ireland and their community leaders have suffered much. They want to move on now and are at work building a new future. Much remains to be done, healing memories, embedding hope, but the military phase, Operation Banner, has been brought to a conclusion, and we can give thanks."

After "The Last Post" had echoed around St Paul's, more than 700 veterans marched to Guildhall for a reception hosted by the Prince of Wales, who was accompanied by the Duchess of Cornwall. The Prince said: "I can only too well imagine how shattering it has been for those who have lost loved ones during these difficult times, having myself experienced the loss of my great uncle, Lord Mountbatten, to a terrorist bomb in 1979."

Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, Chief of the General Staff, recalled how "the Troubles dominated the world's headlines. Bogside, the Ardoyne, the Divis Flats – names that will have a special resonance for so many of you. Names that entered our national psyche."

Mary Moreland served in the Ulster Defence Regiment with her husband, John, who was shot dead in 1988. She said yesterday: "I think what we have to do is not live in the past, but remember it. Don't let us rewrite history, let us remember it how it was, and let us move forward."

Steve Norman, who served three tours of duty in Northern Ireland with the Royal Anglian Regiment, was shot in Londonderry in 1973. "British soldiers do feel a bit let down or ignored, or feel the sacrifice has not been recognised," he said. "But today goes a long way to redress that."

Gordon Brown, in a statement, said of the soldiers: "Today we salute their courage. It's in their honour and for all the people of Northern Ireland that all those committed to the province's future must work together to ensure a lasting peace."

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