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## Viewpoint: Soldiers paved the way to peace

Thursday, 11 September 2008

The sacrifice of the men and women killed during the Army's service in the Northern Ireland Troubles was fittingly remembered in St Paul's Cathedral in London yesterday.

During the 38 years from 1969 to 2007, more than 300,000 personnel served in the province, with 763 giving their

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A march by 700 veterans to the Guildhall to commemorate servicemen and women who served in Northern Ireland during military campaign, Operation Banner.

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lives in the cause of [redacted] peace. It was the longest continuous tour of duty in the Army's history and the province owes those soldiers an immense debt of gratitude.

When the Army was first brought in to the province in 1969, their role was to support the beleaguered RUC. The soldiers were welcomed by all sections of the community in the initial stages and they sought to act as a neutral peace-keeping force. Almost inevitably as the violence grew, the Army was regarded as partisan by nationalists.

Mistakes were made, but in general terms, the Army's role was to hold the line against terrorists from all sides. And ultimately the Army won that battle, not in the conventional manner of defeating the terrorists, but in convincing republicans that their murderous campaign would not succeed.

Effectively, the Army and RUC paved the way for the peace process by demonstrating that continuing violence was futile.

There are many people alive in Northern Ireland today who owe their lives to the Army. Without its presence, the province would have descended into civil war with utterly devastating consequences.

The Army paid a heavy price for its deployment in Northern Ireland, with more than 700 soldiers killed and a further 6,000 injured, many of them

grievously. For the most part the soldiers were young men from all parts of the UK who were plunged into a conflict they could not understand.

Undoubtedly, many of them had no desire to be here and could never come to terms with the tribal passions which fuelled the violence. They were simply doing their duty at the behest of the government of the day.

Today, other young men in the Army are performing the same role in the very different arenas of Afghanistan and Iraq. They too are following their government's orders and serving and dying in an attempt to restore peace and the primacy of politics.

Like most conflicts, including the Northern Ireland Troubles, the violence follows the failure of politics. And, as ever, it is the job of young men in uniform to clean up the mess and protect lives.

If former veterans of the Northern Ireland conflict were to return today they would find a much changed scene. Although in the grip of the worldwide economic downturn, there is a new vibrancy about the province, a much rebuilt landscape and, above all, a more peaceful society. Devolved government has been restored and there is genuine hope that the tragedy of the past will never be repeated.

The soldiers who patrolled the streets of the cities and town and the laneways of the countryside and who spent countless hours on stake-outs or roadblocks helped to create the society we enjoy today.

Virtually all the physical evidence of their stay in the province has gone with the dismantling of border towers and fortified garrisons but they have left a more lasting legacy.

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It is unusual for 'The Belfast Telegraph' to give such a provocatively naive, sanitised view of part played by the British Army in Ulster. "Mistakes were made". Good grief! What an understatement! Hundreds of killings, thousands of beatings (not to mention collusion) put down to little "mistakes". 'The Belfast Telegraph' editors are normally much less wishy-washy than this.

*Posted by Kevin* | 11.09.08, 16:03 GMT

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