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Northern Ireland conflict remembered

[Stephen Bates](#) at St Paul's Cathedral
[The Guardian](#), Thursday September 11 2008

As a memorial it may have somewhat lacked the poignancy of a Remembrance Sunday or the sense of devastating loss from the trenches of the first world war, but yesterday, with due ceremony, the longest British military deployment in history - the 38-year campaign in Northern Ireland - was formally laid to rest at a service in St Paul's Cathedral, London.

Two thousand veterans and their families - a small fraction of the 300,000 personnel who served as part of Operation Banner in the province between 1969 and last year - attended the service to remember old colleagues and tense times on the streets of Belfast and Derry and in the rolling fields of South Armagh.

It was a conflict still vivid to them but somehow already distant in time, far away and no longer raw, though it lasted nearly four times the period of the first and second world wars combined.

Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick, the last of the 763 British military casualties of paramilitary terrorism in the province, was killed 11 years ago. By comparison, the much shorter but continuing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have already cost 176 and 117 British lives respectively.

In the congregation were politicians whose reputations were marked by the Troubles. Lady Thatcher was there, and Tony Blair, both sitting a few rows back. Gordon Brown marched past them to the front row, glancing at neither. In front of him, Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall represented the Queen. In the front row sat civic dignitaries and the chief of the defence staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup. His predecessor, Lord Inge, in command from 1994-

1997, led the recital of an act of commitment during the service.

They heard Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, recall in his sermon that Harold Wilson, the prime minister who first authorised the deployment of troops back in 1969, had warned his cabinet that if the army was sent in, it would take many years to get it out.

The bishop quoted WB Yeats's line from his poem *The Second Coming*, "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold", to argue that the military intervention had prevented anarchy: "Mistakes were made but the British armed forces proved they had the discipline and the resilience to stand firm until there could be a political settlement ... Operation Banner has been a test of faith and resolve. If we come to believe that there is no more to life than looking after 'number one' and being as comfortable as possible until the end of our mortal span then the centre will not hold and the world as we know it will dissolve."

Northern Irish politicians were conspicuous by their absence. It was said that the deputy first minister, Martin McGuinness, for so long associated with the IRA's campaign, had been invited but had declined. As it was, although the organist played Carrickfergus and Danny Boy, the only Ulster accent heard was that of Nicola-Louise Scanlon, 13, the daughter of a veteran, who lives in Northern Ireland and was invited to read a prayer.

That left it to be a very British commemoration, a service for stoical stiff upper lips: the Old Hundredth psalm, and O God Our Help in Ages Past, and the reading of the Sermon on the Mount: blessed are the peacemakers.

Mary Moreland, whose husband, John, was a part-time soldier with the Ulster Defence Regiment and was killed by terrorists while carrying out his civilian job as a coal merchant in 1988, lit a candle in memory of the military dead.

Afterwards, about 700 of the veterans, paunchier, grey-haired and balding in their civvies but with their service medals gleaming, lined up outside under the watchful eye and barked commands of a Guards regimental sergeant major to march behind a military band through the City of London to a reception at Guildhall.

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