

The long goodbye

Sunday, August 05, 2007 - By Colm Heatley in Belfast

With Operation Banner completed and the British army's 38-year security role in the North at an end, the Republican community is glad to see them go.

Life was not easy for Eamon McDevitt. He was born deaf and mute to a family of ten in Strabane in Co Derry in the 1940s.

As a child, he attended a special needs school in Dublin, but he was described by people who knew him as "happy-go-lucky" and "innocent".

By the age of 28, he spent most of his time in his home town, where he lived with his parents. In August 1971, a British soldier shot McDevitt from almost point-blank range, killing him instantly.

A t more than six foot tall and wearing a red shirt, McDevitt was an easy target for the soldier, who, it later emerged, opened fire without being given an order. There had been trouble in Strabane at the time, with some stone throwing, but McDevitt wasn't involved.

McDevitt was one of almost 150 Catholic civilians killed by the British army during its operations in the North, which came to an end last week when Operation Banner - the name given to its role in the six counties - officially ended.

"I'm glad to see the army go. They treated Catholics here like dirt, they killed my brother for nothing and didn't bat an eyelid about it," said McDevitt's brother, Sammy. He's now 71, and was a former British soldier himself. They may as well have killed my father and mother too, they died of broken hearts shortly afterwards," said McDevitt.

"Eamon's murder finished them off. The British army should never have been sent here in the first place." Like many Catholics, Sammy McDevitt faced discrimination in the North.

"The employers would ask what school you went to and when they found out they never got back to you. That's why I joined the army, I needed the money to live," he said.

While Operation Banner has ended and the North is now officially classed as a 'normal security zone', 5,000 soldiers will remain in the North to support the police. The legacy of the British Army still exists, especially in nationalist areas where the army was most active, and resentment and anger towards the it remain.

The army and other state forces were responsible for about 10 per cent of all deaths during the violence, but just over 20 per cent of all Catholic victims were killed by the state. During the course of Operation Banner, which began in 1969, the army suffered 763 losses.

The army was regarded by many as unsuitable for duties with a civilian population.

Throughout the Troubles there were allegations of aggression, unnecessary force and anti-Irish bigotry, mainly in the nationalist areas where support for the IRA was greatest.

Initially welcomed by some in the North's beleaguered nationalist community in the summer of 1969, the army's honeymoon period ended with the Falls Road curfew of 1970.

With the deaths of 14 civilians in Derry on Bloody Sunday in 1972, the battle-lines were drawn. Nationalists viewed the army not only as an instrument to maintain the status quo, but as explicitly anti-Catholic.

Incidents such as the army's shooting of Peter McBride, a Catholic teenager shot in the back by British soldiers, reinforced this view.

McBride was 18 when he was gunned down by the army yards from his house in the New Lodge area of north Belfast in 1992. He had been stopped and searched by the same patrol of Scots Guards seconds before two of the patrol's soldiers shot him twice in the back.

Both were found guilty of murder, but served only three years. They were then reinstated into the

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army and are now serving in Iraq. Their reinstatement into the army created further anger among nationalists and many saw it as a message that the law did not apply to British troops in the North.

McBride's mother, Jean, said: "I don't actually hold any bitterness at this stage towards the two soldiers who killed Peter, but I can't forgive an organisation that still hasn't apologised for murdering an innocent young lad.

"Of course I'm glad that they are going, they brought nothing to our community except a lot of heartache. I wish they'd gone before Peter was killed. He'll never walk through my door again."

Jean McBride brought her family up in the New Lodge district during the worst of the Troubles. By 1992, when Peter was killed, the area had been heavily militarised and the high-rise flats had been used as army observation posts.

A heavily-fortified barracks sat at the bottom of the area, while a concrete bunker was located at the top of the estate. Posters imploring local people to "join the resistance" were regularly placed on the bunker by republicans and many people did.

A few weeks before McBride was killed, an IRA sniper team had killed a British soldier in the area. Many people feel that McBride's killing was a reprisal. The first British soldier killed in the Troubles, Robert Curtis, was shot dead by the IRA in the New Lodge.



The experience in the New Lodge was not unusual - during the Troubles, the army routinely sealed off entire nationalist streets, searching houses one-by-one and effectively putting the area under a temporary curfew. These tactics continued until the IRA ceasefire in 1994.

In the early years of the Troubles, the army was involved in almost daily gun battles and riot situations with the IRA. However, by the 1980s, when troop levels were at an all-time high of 27,000 soldiers, the situation was far more stable.

That army presence, combined with the 13,000-strong RUC, meant there was one armed member of the state forces for every 25 people in the North. When US Congressman Peter King visited the Falls Road in Belfast in the early 1990s to explore the peace process with republicans, he remarked that it felt as though he had entered a "war-zone".

He was shocked to find helicopters buzzed overhead almost constantly and everyday army and RUC foot patrols resembled military manoeuvres rather than exercises in policing. Massive military installations dominated the countryside.

The army base at Bessbrook in south Armagh was the busiest heliport in Europe during the Troubles, partly because of the huge military build-up in the area and because IRA attacks forced the military off the roads and into the air.

Communities in the North are now trying to adjust to normality after decades of military presence. Sinn Féin has welcomed the end of the army's role, which Gerry Kelly, a Sinn Féin minister in the new assembly, described as "oppressive".

However, some unionists expressed concerns and praised the army for its work. For many unionists, the army provided both security and employment - many Protestants worked part-time in the bases and in garrison towns, shops and restaurants were grateful of the extra army trade.

But how successful was the army in meeting its objectives in the North? While it was, by the mid-1970s, able to contain the IRA to an "acceptable level of violence", internal military documents, released last month under a freedom of information request, revealed the army accepted it could never defeat the IRA.

The policy of "containing" the IRA had two consequences - the British government let military might rather than politics do the talking and republican communities were saturated with police and army. House raids, regular patrols, arrests, and allegations of brutal behaviour ensured whole republican communities regarded the army with hostility.

The end of Operation Banner, in which the army's official role was to act as support to the police, affords the North more normality than it has known since the creation of the state.

However, in a sign that it still has a way to go, as the army packed up last week, loyalists were once again on the streets, attacking police in Bangor, Co Down.

Brief history of the British army in the North

1969: The first soldiers arrive in the North and are welcomed by many.

1970: The army imposes the so-called 'Falls Road curfew' and hundreds of houses are raided. What goodwill existed between the nationalist community and the army evaporates. The army now admits that this was a serious mistake.

February 1971: Robert Curtis is the first British soldier to be shot dead in the Troubles. An IRA sniper kills him as he patrols the New Lodge district of north Belfast.

January 1972: The shooting dead of unarmed civilians at a civil rights march in Derry by British paratroopers sparks international outrage. The British embassy in Dublin is torched. After Bloody Sunday, the IRA receives a huge influx of volunteers.

1977: The British government pursues a policy of 'Ulsterisation, Normalisation, Criminalisation' in an attempt to portray the violence in the North as a nonpolitical, civil policing issue. This means that the official role of the army is to support the RUC. It is also an attempt to minimise army casualties by placing the locally-recruited RUC and Ulster Defence Regiment to the fore.

August 1979: Eighteen British soldiers are killed by a series of IRA bombs near Warrenpoint, Co Down. Sixteen of the 18 killed are members of the Parachute Regiment.

Late 1980s: Details of the army's Force Research Unit (FRU) start to emerge. The FRU, under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Kerr, is heavily involved with loyalist paramilitaries in the targeting of nationalists for assassination. At the same time, loyalists are giving photomontages of nationalists to the press – they say these security files were given to them by the army.

1994: The IRA announces its first ceasefire, which later ends in 1996.

1997: Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick is the last British soldier to die in the North. He is shot dead by a sniper at a vehicle checkpoint in south Armagh.

July 31, 2007: Operation Banner, the longest-running campaign in the army's history, comes to an end.

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