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From The Times September 11, 2008

Tribute to soldiers lost in Northern Ireland

Last Post sounds for those killed in 38-year campaign where peace was the only victor

Valentine Low

In the summer of 1969, when he had not yet turned 21, Prince Charles was invested as the Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle. Six weeks later the first troops – by a quirk of fate, from the Prince of Wales’s Own Regiment – were sent on to the streets of Northern Ireland to quell the civil unrest in Londonderry.

Yesterday, nearly four decades later, the Prince of Wales was among those who attended a service at St Paul’s Cathedral in London to mark the end of the military involvement in Northern Ireland. Operation Banner lasted 38 years, and was the longest military deployment in the Army’s history. More than 300,000 servicemen and women served in the Province, and 763 military personnel were killed as a direct result of terrorism.

The end of Operation Banner in July 2007 passed without fanfare. Yesterday provided what many felt was a long-awaited opportunity to pay tribute to the men and women who lost their lives during the Troubles.

Old soldiers in their regimental ties, their chests festooned with medals; a marchpast outside the cathedral. The occasion could have had the air of a victory celebration, except that it was more sombre than that, for this was one campaign that had no victors, no vanquished. In the words of one former soldier, John Moore: “Over time we just wore each other out.”

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Times Archive, 1969: British Army units to guard key points in Northern Ireland

The United Kingdom Government has agreed to make available Army units for guard duties in Ulster. Their role will be passive

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At the front of the cathedral were seated the politicians who over the years have grappled with the great intractable problem of Northern Ireland, including Tony Blair and Baroness Thatcher; with them was Gordon Brown, the only living British Prime Minister not to have felt the burden of the Troubles. Before the service he issued a statement in praise of Britain's Armed Forces.

"They helped create conditions for the peace Northern Ireland now enjoys and today we salute their courage," he said.

"It is 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."

Dr Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, spoke to the congregation of the ultimate good that came from the terrible conflict. "When the Cabinet was deciding whether or not to deploy troops to Northern Ireland, Harold Wilson went round the table twice asking each minister for his views, because as he said, 'If we go in, it will take many years

to get out'. It was an accurate prediction."

He went on: "Force cannot in the end resolve social conflict, but can offer a vital breathing space in which the normal processes of democratic debate and decision-making can reassert themselves. Military intervention can hold the forces of chaos at bay while people learn again how communities with very different histories and aspirations can live together and do business with one another.

"Operation Banner kept open that vital pass through which a more hopeful future for Ulster could enter."

The congregation's minds may have been on the future, but their hearts were remembering the losses of the past, and after the sermon a candle of remembrance was lit by Mary Moreland, whose husband was murdered by terrorists in 1988. John Moreland was a coal merchant by day, a part-time soldier in the Ulster Defence Regiment by night; he was shot in the head making a delivery to a customer in Downpatrick, Co Down.



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"It has been a day of mixed emotions," Mrs Moreland, 50, said afterwards at a Guildhall reception. "It has been a great privilege to be able to say thank you to all the servicemen and women who lost their lives, and those who were injured. But let us move on. Let us remember the past, but don't let's live in it."

If she symbolised the suffering endured over the years, Nicola-Louise Scanlon symbolised the hope for the future. The 13-year-old from Omagh read one of the prayers of intercession at the end, the only time during the hour-long service that a Northern Ireland accent was heard.

Her home town was the scene of one of the worst atrocities ever seen in the Province, but now things are different. As Nicola-Louise said: "Now people are able to walk down the streets safely."

After the lighting of the candle the Last Post was sounded, for what may be the last time, for the victims of the Troubles.

So many deaths, so much suffering: it is hard to avoid asking the question, was it all worth it? "At the time you wondered," said Kelvin Barton, 62, from Deal, Kent, a former sergeant with the Royal Engineers. "When you are a serving soldier you are trained to do as you are told, although you might question it in your mind – 'What am I doing here? Why?' But now I could say yes, it was worth it."

As Mrs Moreland put it: "It wasn't nice what people had to go through to get where we are today but without the sacrifices of all the regiments we wouldn't have peace."

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