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NORTHERN IRELAND: QUESTION AT WESTMINSTER ABOUT THE USE OF FIREARMS

The following is the text of a question to and answer by the Minister of State for Defence in the House of Commons on Wednesday, 26 May, 1971; extracts from supplementary questions and answers are also shown.

"Mr Kevin McNamara asked the Minister of State for Defence, whether he would make a statement about the nature of the orders concerning the use of firearms by Her Majesty's troops in Belfast.

Lord Balneil: Fire may be opened by troops when it is judged necessary to do so to save life or when firearms have been or appear likely to be used against the security forces or persons whom it is their duty to protect. In this context a firearm includes such weapons as grenades, petrol bombs and gelignite.

Whenever practicable an oral warning, preferably by loud hailer, is given. There are, however, circumstances in which soldiers are empowered to fire without giving an oral warning; essentially when a warning is impracticable or when any delay could lead to death or serious injury for the soldier himself or people whom it is his duty to protect.

It is of course the requirement of the common law that when acting in support of the civil power a soldier shall use no more force than is necessary for the accomplishment of his immediate task.

Mr McNamara: May I take this opportunity, I think on behalf of the whole House, to express our sympathy to the families of the people who have been tragically killed and injured in Northern Ireland, particularly to the family of Sgt. Willet who acted yesterday in a most courageous way?

What the Right Hon. Gentleman said is very different both in tenor and in substance from what was said yesterday by the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, who seemed to be more intent on unifying his own party than in bringing help and succour to the communities there. Will the Rt.Hon. Gentleman confirm that, if what the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland said was correct, he conceded victory to the Provisionals, which none of us could want, and brought encouragement to people who want to see further bloodshed in Northern Ireland? Will the Rt.Hon Gentleman also confirm that British troops are not advised to fire warning shots?

/Lord Balneil:

Lord Balneil: I join in expressing sympathy to those who were hurt. In particular I pay tribute to Sgt. Willet of the Third Parachute Battalion, and Inspector Nurse of the RUC, whose brave action in shielding the bystanders and children undoubtedly saved their lives. In the case of Sgt. Willet, this was at the cost of his own life, and I offer the sincerest condolences of the whole House to his widow and relatives.

I understand that the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland has this afternoon made a clarifying statement to remove any possible ambiguities. The position of the two Governments is the same.

In answer to the third question, warning shots are not resorted to by the Army. When the Army opens fire it is at a target and is designed to kill.

Mr George Thomson: We on this side of the House associate ourselves with the expressions of sympathy voiced by the Minister and my Hon. friend to the widow and children of the Sergeant who was killed, and to join in the tributes to the superb courage shown by the Sergeant..."