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## Principles of Minimum Force and the Parachute Regiment in Northern Ireland, 1969–1972

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### ABSTRACT

Developing literature on Operation *Banner*, the codename for the British military operation in Northern Ireland, has indicated that the conduct of soldiers deployed was not always in line with principles of minimum force. Adherence to these principles would seem to have been essential to the success of the operation given the initial deployment of the soldiers was in the role of military aid to the civil power. This article will examine the role of one of the British Army's most aggressive units, the Parachute Regiment, and will show how the responses of the regiment to the demands of the operation in Northern Ireland were frequently in contravention of minimum force principles.

**KEYWORDS** Minimum force; Northern Ireland; Terrorism; Counterinsurgency; Parachute Regiment

On 14 August 1969, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland James Chichester-Clark requested the assistance of the British Army in Londonderry/Derry<sup>1</sup>, where they would support the beleaguered Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which had struggled to contain intercommunal violence in the city. This began Operation *Banner*, the British Army's military operation in Northern Ireland and the longest single deployment in the history of the British Army. Among the earliest participants in Operation *Banner* were the soldiers of the Parachute Regiment. Their presence was unsurprising; the regiment had been at the cutting edge of British military operations since its formation in 1941 and, in 1967, had been the last regiment to withdraw from Aden, the most recent conflict that the British Army had been involved in prior to Operation *Banner*.

The Parachute Regiment was one of the most heavily utilized units throughout Operation *Banner* despite drawing significant criticism for their conduct, both in retrospect and at the time. It might be considered that the regiment was placed in a tricky position by having their operational principles defined by the application of minimum force in their role of aid to the

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<sup>1</sup>I will deliberately alternate between the two names for the city throughout this article.

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civil power on British soil given the culture of aggression that was endemic in the regiment. This, in turn, raises questions about the purpose of the early efforts of the British military in Northern Ireland, and suggests that strategy was directed toward the quick and aggressive suppression of a military uprising rather than the effective management of an inter-communal conflict. Much literature on the operation has considered the early failings of the British operation in Northern Ireland and some in the context of the application of minimum force principles. This article seeks to develop this literature by examining the role of the Parachute Regiment in the early period of Operation *Banner*. Using the timeframe of the deployment of British troops on 14 August 1969 until the end of the first residential tour of the First Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, this article will use archival resources, first-hand accounts and existing literature to argue that the Parachute Regiment's early interventions in Operation *Banner* not only failed to adhere to principles of minimum force but were frequently in direct and occasionally deliberate contravention of them.

## The Parachute Regiment

The Parachute Regiment is the airborne infantry element of the British Army and was established at the request of Winston Churchill in 1941. It is an elite unit by virtue of its stringent selection process, rigorous training programme and the requirement of its role to operate with minimal or no support behind enemy lines and against numerically superior forces. As an object of scholarly study, existing literature on the Parachute Regiment in any field is sparse. One notable exception to this rule, Thomas Thornborrow and Andrew Brown's 2009 *Organization Studies* article "Being Regimented': Aspiration, Discipline and Identity Work in the British Parachute Regiment," is instructive on the culture of the "Paras." In it, the authors argue that paratroopers are "disciplined by discursive practices which encouraged them to regard themselves as aspirants engaged continuously in pursuit of highly desirable yet elusive identities." They continue that

paratroopers' preferred conceptions of their selves were disciplined by understandings both of what it meant to be a paratrooper and of the institutional processes by which they were made. In talking about how the Regiment "manufactured" them, paratroopers provided insight on how the Regiment produced and reproduced the idealized identities to which they aspired.<sup>2</sup>

Emphasizing the implication that the British government needs the Parachute Regiment at the forefront of its international military campaigns,

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Thornborrow and Andrew D. Brown, "Being Regimented': Aspiration, Discipline and Identity Work in the British Parachute Regiment," *Organization Studies* 30/4 (2009), 355–56.

the authors note that since 1976 a battalion from the Parachute Regiment has been constantly on spearhead duties.<sup>3</sup>

Their study, which features interviews with 70 paratroopers, revealed the inherent superiority and aggression of the regiment. The comments of one soldier alluded to the lack of respect for authority: "The people in Command were fucking idiots. They didn't have a clue how to run a Battalion." Aggression was a quality both encouraged and rewarded: "The Patrol Commander told me to stop this fucking great big bloke, who seemed to me twice the size of me. I set me authority on him, and done it professionally, without waffling, done it professionally. Made me turn round and say 'right, that's it, I've broken the ice, I am now a fuckin' Paratrooper.'" The article also notes the issue of status anxiety, one soldier commenting that "you don't feel like you are the finished article, you never feel like you are the finished article in the Regiment."<sup>4</sup> Finally, crucially, one soldier noted that "You were really excessively aggressive to the point where it was manufactured."<sup>5</sup> Other scholarship, although not focused on the Parachute Regiment, has discussed the nature and rationality of military masculinity in the context of the British Army.<sup>6</sup>

Otherwise, existing literature on the Paras is in the form of memoir. Author and former member of both the Special Air Service (SAS) and Parachute Regiment Michael Asher recalled his time with 2 Para, emphasizing the aggression of the regiment during the early days of the conflict: "smashing down doors, breaking up furniture, kicking and rifle-butting anyone who resisted."<sup>7</sup> This he blamed on their training, which, "coupled with the peculiar nature of our existence in Northern Ireland, turned us into savages. We begged and prayed for a chance to fight, to smash, to kill, to destroy: we were fire-eating berserkers, a hurricane of human brutality ready to burst forth of anyone or anything that stood in our way."<sup>8</sup> Harry McCallion's *Killing Zone* also provides some insight into the mindset of young Paras before their deployment, recalling that, after the murders of three young Scottish soldiers, the attitude among his comrades was "the IRA [Irish Republican Army] didn't know what they'd let themselves in for."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 360.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 363–64.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 367.

<sup>6</sup>As discussed in Rachel Woodward, and K. Neil Jenkins, "Military Identities in the Situated Accounts of British Military Personnel," in *Sociology* 45/2 (2011), 252–68. See also Frank J. Barrett, "The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity," *Gender, Work and Organizations* 3/3 (1996), 129–42; Hannah Hale, "The Development of British Military Masculinities through Symbolic Resources," *Culture and Psychology* 14/3 (2008), 305–32; Paul Higate (ed.), *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State* (Westport CT: Praeger 2003), especially John Hockley's chapter, "No More Heroes: Masculinity in the Infantry," 15–26; also John Hockley, *Squaddies: Portrait of a Subculture* (Exeter: Exeter University Press 1986).

<sup>7</sup>Michael Asher, *Shoot to Kill* (London: Penguin 1990), 119–20.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>9</sup>Harry McCallion, *Killing Zone* (London: Bloomsbury 1995), 39–40.

## Minimum Force

Minimum force, as a tool for internal conflict, was emphasized in 1934 by Major General Sir Charles Gwynn in his book *Imperial Policing*.<sup>10</sup> As a young platoon commander in the early days of Operation *Banner*, later to rise to the role of General Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland, Lieutenant General Alistair Irwin stressed that

A challenge for officers and NCOs is to suppress any natural instincts of some of the men to behave badly, instincts acquired in the bid for survival in some of the rough environments in which some of them had been unfortunate enough to have been raised ... Usually people responded very well to good leadership but sometimes, somebody would slip through the net.<sup>11</sup>

Recent debates in *Small Wars & Insurgencies* between Rod Thornton and Huw Bennett have illuminated the importance of the concept in contemporary security operations. Where Thornton argued that the British Army applied concepts of minimum force uniformly in all counterinsurgency operations, Bennett contends that “the concept is virtually meaningless in analytical terms, because it lacks clear criteria for judging when it applies and when not.”<sup>12</sup> Bennett further argued that during British Army operations in Kenya “the definition of ‘minimum’ stayed deliberately ambiguous, and thus malleable.”<sup>13</sup> As pointed out by Christopher Dandeker and James Gow, among others, many states, Britain included, share the view that it is best to train armed forces for high-intensity warfare, then train down to cater for missions where “a more restrained use of force is appropriate.”<sup>14</sup> They cite the influence of Gustav Daniker and his argument that the core values of the military are to protect, help, and save. The so-called “Dobbie Doctrine” argues that peacekeeping is characterized by impartiality and minimum force, while peace enforcement is conducted on more traditional military principles.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Charles Gwynn, *Imperial Policing* (Macmillan 1934), 13–14; see also Aaron Edwards, “Misapplying Lessons Learned? Analysing the Utility of British Counterinsurgency Strategy in Northern Ireland 1971–76,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21/2 (2010), 304–05.

<sup>11</sup>Lt-Gen. Irwin, interview with author, 16 February 2009.

<sup>12</sup>Huw Bennett, “Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21/3 (2010), 465–66.

<sup>13</sup>Huw Bennett, “The Other Side of the COIN: Minimum and Exemplary Force in British Army Counterinsurgency in Kenya,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18/4 (2007), 640. See also Huw Bennett, “The Mau Mau Emergency as Part of the British Army’s Post-war Counter-Insurgency Experience,” *Defense and Security Analysis* 23/2 (2007), 145; John Newsinger, “Minimum Force, British Counter-Insurgency and the Mau Mau Rebellion,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 3:1 (1992), 47–57.

<sup>14</sup>Christopher Dandeker and James Gow, “Military Culture and Strategic Peacekeeping,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 10/2 (1999), 58.

<sup>15</sup>Gustav Daniker, *The Guardian Soldier: On the Nature and Use of Future Armed Forces* (New York: Travaux de Recherche); Charles Dobbie, “A Concept for Post-Cold War Peacekeeping,” *Survival* 36/3 (1994), 121–48.

A recent study by B.W. Morgan and M.L.R. Smith has discussed the concept of minimum force in the context of the entirety of Operation *Banner*, describing the Paras as “shock troops renowned for their ferocious attitude to combat.” This study emphasizes that minimum force, though desirable from a strategic perspective, was rarely implementable on an operational level.<sup>16</sup>

Significant work has recently been added to the debate by Aaron Edwards. In his study of Lieutenant Colonel Colin Mitchell and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders’ infamous campaign in Aden, *Mad Mitch’s Tribal Law: Aden and the End of Empire*, Edwards discusses the concept of “Argyll Law,” and shows how elastic the concept of minimum force could be, depending on the situation that British troops found themselves in.<sup>17</sup> Other literature on Aden supports this, Hinchcliffe, Ducker and Holt’s book on Aden showing how other regiments were criticized for surrendering the initiative to the insurgents.<sup>18</sup> This emphasizes that even at different stages of the same operation the concept of minimum force could be interpreted in different ways.

British military commanders, therefore, faced a significant challenge when establishing operational principles in Northern Ireland, an operation where they would be principally acting as aid to the civil power. This challenge has been emphasized by the work of Niall O’ Dochartaigh, which highlighted the difficulties facing security forces in Northern Ireland during the tension of civil rights marches.<sup>19</sup> In his role as the Commander of 39 Infantry Brigade, General Sir Frank Kitson played a central role in the establishment of military strategy. His 1971 book *Low Intensity Operations* argued that counterinsurgency depended on “an ability to regard everything on its merits without regard to customs, doctrine or drill.”<sup>20</sup> Edwards has cited the importance of Kitson’s investment in the battle for civilian hearts and minds during the early years of the Northern Irish campaign.<sup>21</sup>

Christopher Tuck has noted that the appropriate approach to counterinsurgency in Northern Ireland was not necessarily the same as that appropriate to Kenya or Malaya and therefore the application of minimum force could not necessarily translate from one campaign to the next.<sup>22</sup> Other

<sup>16</sup>B.W. Morgan and M.L.R. Smith, “Northern Ireland and Minimum Force: The Refutation of a Concept?” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27/1 (2016), 91.

<sup>17</sup>See Aaron Edwards, *Mad Mitch’s Tribal Law: Aden and the End of Empire* (Edinburgh: Mainstream 2014), 222–33; also Jonathan Walker, “Red Wolves and British Lions: The Conflict in Aden,” in Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (eds), *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (Oxford: Osprey 2008), 163.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Hinchcliffe, John T. Ducker, and Maria Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia: The British Retreat from Aden* (London: I.B. Tauris 2007), 202.

<sup>19</sup>This was particularly problematic during civil rights marches, as noted in Niall O’Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles* (Cork: Cork University Press 1997), 59.

<sup>20</sup>Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peacekeeping* (London: Faber & Faber 1971), 131.

<sup>21</sup>Edwards, “Misapplying Lessons Learned?” 315.

<sup>22</sup>Christopher Tuck, “Northern Ireland and the British Approach to Counter-Insurgency,” *Defence & Security Analysis* 23/2 (2007), 165–83.

authors have considered the role that minimum force has played further afield. Mary Kaldor and Andrew Salmon have discussed the implementation of the European Security Strategy and the role that minimum force plays within it.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Mockaitis and Robert Cassidy, among others, have argued that Britain was successful in applying counterinsurgency methods to its Northern Irish campaign.<sup>24</sup> Others, notably Rod Thornton, have suggested that early mistakes paved the way for a more appropriate strategy which eventually allowed the implementation of police primacy in 1976.<sup>25</sup> Huw Bennett has also discussed the adjustments that British strategy underwent during 1972, the bloodiest year of the conflict.<sup>26</sup> Aaron Edwards has noted that “the Army’s initial deployment in Northern Ireland would seem to run counter to the fundamental tenets of British COIN [counterinsurgency].”<sup>27</sup>

Some authors have noted the influence of the Northern Ireland experience on British counterinsurgency methods.<sup>28</sup> Others, such as Thomas Rid and Thomas Keaney, have commented on the difficulty in gauging the suitability of existing British Army methods for application and transplantation into other operational situations.<sup>29</sup> The French campaign in Algeria and, in particular, the impact that the application of minimum force could have had for the French has also drawn the attention of authors. Charles Townshend and Douglas Porch have both emphasized that initial French successes were undermined by increased brutality, which ultimately brought positive political implications for the Algerians.<sup>30</sup> The utility of this

<sup>23</sup>Mary Kaldor and Andrew Salmon, “Military Force and European Strategy,” *Survival* 48/1 (2006), 19–34.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas R. Mockaitis, “Low-Intensity Conflict: The British Experience,” *Conflict Quarterly* 13/1 (1993), 14; Robert M. Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror* (Westport CT: Praeger 2006), 88. Noteworthy was the fact that the British Army reflectively considered the first two years of conflict to be “largely characterised by widespread public disorder,” before moving into “a classic insurgency.” Chief of the General Staff, *Operation Banner: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland, Army Code 71842* (London: MoD 2006).

<sup>25</sup>Rod Thornton, “Getting It Wrong: The Crucial Mistakes Made in the Early Stages of the British Army’s Deployment to Northern Ireland (August 1969 to March 1972),” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30/1 (2007), 77. Also relevant is M.L.R. Smith and Peter Neumann, “Motorman’s Long Journey: Changing the Strategic Setting in Northern Ireland,” *Contemporary British History* 19/4 (2005), 413–35.

<sup>26</sup>Huw Bennett, “From Direct Rule to Motorman: Adjusting British Military Strategy for Northern Ireland in 1972,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33/6 (2010), 511–32.

<sup>27</sup>Edwards, “Misapplying Lessons Learned?” 307. Underlining this is John Bew, “Mass, Methods and Means: The Northern Ireland ‘Model’ of Counter-Insurgency” in Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones, and M.L.R. Smith (eds), *The New Counterinsurgency Era in Critical Perspective* (London: Palgrave 2015), 156–72.

<sup>28</sup>Robert M. Cassidy, “The British Army and Counterinsurgency: The Salience of Military Culture,” *Military Review* (May–June 2005), 53–59; Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency in the Post-imperial Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1995), 138.

<sup>29</sup>Thomas Rid and Thomas Keaney, “Counterinsurgency in context,” in Thomas Rid and Thomas Keaney (eds), *Understanding Counterinsurgency: Doctrine, Operations and Challenges* (Abingdon: Routledge 2010), 255.

<sup>30</sup>Charles Townshend, “In Aid of the Civil Power,” in Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (eds), *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (Oxford: Osprey 2009), 33; Douglas Porch, “French Imperial Warfare 1945–62,” in Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (eds), *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (Oxford: Osprey 2009), 108.

comparison has been questions by Mark Mazower, who argues that evidence of minimum force principles was always far more obvious in British operations than in the French campaign in Algeria.<sup>31</sup> Thornton has further pointed out the significance of the April 1919 killing of Sikh protesters at Amritsar, for which Brigadier Reginald Dyer, the only British officer present, was castigated for his use of excessive force.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Purnima Bose and Laura Lyons have drawn parallels between Amritsar and Northern Ireland, and focused specifically on the concept of minimum force.<sup>33</sup> The existing literature therefore implies that adhering to minimum force principles has been tricky, in many cases because of the belief within the military that rapid success could be achieved through the application of an aggressive military policy.

### The Arrival of the Paras and the Yellow Card: Establishing Minimum Force in Ulster

The early weeks and months of Operation *Banner* demonstrated the difficulty that troops had in applying minimum force principles in their day-to-day activities. This was particularly true for the Paras. The Parachute Regiment as a whole was deployed quickly and often during the early days of Operation *Banner*, but it was their First Battalion that received the first regimental residential tour of duty, arriving for an 18-month residential tour of duty as the 39th Infantry Brigade at Holywood Barracks near Belfast with special responsibility for Belfast and the east of the province in September 1970. There, they would fall under the command of Brigadier Frank Kitson.<sup>34</sup>

Insight into the attitude of the regiment during these early deployments is available through the regimental journal. In *Pegasus: The Journal of Airborne Forces*, the soldiers of the Parachute Regiment could offer general reflections about their ongoing duties. The language of early entries in the *Pegasus* deployment diary is dramatically different to that which developed very quickly after, having a reflective and circumspect tone.

A 1970 edition of *Pegasus* published, by way of some sort of official deployment statement, "Our sympathy goes out to our brethren, Roman Catholic and Protestant, in Northern Ireland, in their present time of trouble. We shall pray that a just and lasting peace may be established."<sup>35</sup> The Para

<sup>31</sup>Mark Mazower, "Conclusion," in Mark Mazower (ed.), *The Policing of Politics in the Twentieth Century*, (Providence: Berghahn Books 1997), 251.

<sup>32</sup>Rod Thornton, "British Army and Its Minimum Force Philosophy," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 15/1 (2004), 85; also Huw Bennett, "Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21/3 (2010), 465–66.

<sup>33</sup>Purnima Bose and Laura Lyons, "Dyer Consequences: The Troops of Amritsar, Ireland, and the Lessons of the 'Minimum' Force Debate," *boundary 2* 26/2 (1999), 199–229. See also Nick Lloyd, "The Amritsar Massacre and the Minimum Force Debate," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21/2 (2010), 382–403.

<sup>34</sup>*Pegasus* 23/1 (1968), 20–21.

<sup>35</sup>*Pegasus* 24/4 (1969), 1.



reporter also noted that “The situation in this part of Belfast was a very serious one, with fear and tension in the air. The complexities of the religious difference; the depth of inborn bigotry and hatred on both sides is beyond the comprehension of anyone who is not Irish.”<sup>36</sup> One interesting comment from the journal’s January 1970 issue was that “it is much to the credit of the Parachute soldiers that in only one week, in the toughest part of Belfast, the attitude of the people towards the Army has changed completely ... The Battalion have more than lived up to their Regimental motto ‘Ready for Anything.’”<sup>37</sup> In the absence of a defined attitude toward the Army prior to the arrival of the Paras, much rhetorical evidence suggests that soldiers arriving in Northern Ireland prior to the July 1970 Falls Curfew were in fact welcomed. Also noteworthy from this article and perhaps undermining the hyperbole of Para rhetoric was the comment that soldiers had “very little relaxation, we carry loaded weapons and the slightest friction could set off another holocaust. We hope that our efforts will prevent this, as success is not measured by the use of force but by the lack of it.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite the consistently measured tone of the reports in *Pegasus*, they reveal the ebullient nature of the regiment and its members’ deep confidence in, even conviction of, their ability to solve the problems facing the province and to help out other regiments in the process:

At 2am last Sunday with bullets, flames and tear gas flying about in Belfast, the British GOC [General Officer Commanding], Lt-Gen Sir Ian Freeland, called for help. “Let’s get the ‘Red Devils’ up here” he prompted Army HQ in London. By mid-day 1 Para were at his side. Five hundred of them, fully armed, keen for a fight ... they are men of the Parachute Regiment who take pride in being the most efficient and lightest travelling killers in the British Army ... There are 3,500 men in the Parachute Regiment, which ever since February 1942, has been handling the dirtiest jobs the British Army can find ... Now it is Northern Ireland, and the paratroops are expected to show the same dispassionate toughness.<sup>39</sup>

The soldiers of 1 Para departed Northern Ireland after this initial emergency tour without having fired a single shot and returned to Aldershot, to be immediately replaced on duty by the Second Battalion.<sup>40</sup> The First Battalion would not remain in England for long, however, and returned to Northern Ireland in September 1970 for an 18-month residential tour, based at Hollywood Barracks just outside Belfast.<sup>41</sup> On this tour, they took on “special long term responsibilities for Community Relations.”<sup>42</sup> By March 1971, all

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<sup>36</sup>*Pegasus* 25/1 (1970), 22.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 25–26.

<sup>40</sup>*Pegasus* 25/2 (1970), 2.

<sup>41</sup>*Pegasus* 25/4 (1970), 26.

<sup>42</sup>*Pegasus* 26/1 (1971), 18.

three battalions were simultaneously deployed to Northern Ireland, prompting the comment in *Pegasus* that “it is indeed ironic that the spearhead of Britain’s Army should have to be employed in preventing fellow British citizens from cracking one another’s heads!”<sup>43</sup>

## The Rules of Engagement

The regiment issued its own operating procedures, in effect a particular Parachute Regiment rules of engagement, which emphasized the importance of minimum force principles: “Everyone must understand the meaning of minimum force and no one will divert from this in any way whatever ... There will be no use of firearms except in extreme cases ... Everyone must remain calm.” It also emphasized the fact that the troops were operating as aid to the civil power:

This is the first time for very many years that troops have been deployed in the maintenance of law and order in support of the Civil Power in the United Kingdom. Because we are in our own country, and because of our good relations with almost all local communities and factions, the use of force by us against civilians would be an even-more serious matter than usual ... There must be a justification for each separate act ... This must be the reason for using force which must never be applied with punitive intent ... The degree of force used must be the minimum required to achieve the aim ... Members of the armed forces must comply with the law and act calmly and impartially in doing so.<sup>44</sup>

There was, however, a note of confidence that “You will probably get through your tour in Northern Ireland without once having to open fire.”<sup>45</sup> This had been possible at times during the Aden Emergency, but, generally speaking, troops tended to have more success, from the perspective of counterinsurgency, when they adopted an aggressive approach to their operations. The concept of Argyll Law, as detailed by Edwards and Benest, is one such approach that challenged the principles of minimum force.<sup>46</sup> This served to emphasize the disconnection between the strategic desire to operate to minimum force principles and the tactical necessity of considerably more aggressive operations. In 1972, three years into the operation, a Ministry of Defence (MoD) review of operations noted that military strategy was still “heavily Aden-orientated.”<sup>47</sup> General Irwin

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>44</sup>Duxford, United Kingdom, Imperial War Museum, Airborne Forces Museum, Airborne Forces Archive Folder Number 2/33/1, 1st Battalion the Parachute Regiment Standing Operating Procedures for Internal Security Duties in Northern Ireland.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>David Benest, “Atrocities in British Counterinsurgency,” *RUSI Journal* 156/3 (2001), 82; Edwards, *Mad Mitch*.

<sup>47</sup>Kew, United Kingdom, National Archives, DEFE 48/256, Defence Operational Analysis Establishment Memorandum 7221, D.G. Smith, J.D. Watson, E.P.J. Harrison, “A Survey of Military Opinion on Current Internal Security Doctrine and Methods Based on Experience in Northern Ireland,” October 1972, 15.

later reflected on the influence of Aden strategy during the early years of Operation *Banner*:

Aden was the last gasp of imperial policing as it were and we, whether we like it or not and whether we think it's right or not, had a particular style of imperial policing, which was on the whole not frightfully friendly, it's regrettable to say, but it was part of the ethos of the time ... it's just the way things were. We tended to regard the natives around the world as being our subjects and if they were misbehaving, they should be clobbered and told to behave and if they didn't behave then you put them in jail.<sup>48</sup>

The mere influence of Aden was not entirely problematic in the context of the application of minimum force to Operation *Banner*. The latter days of the Aden operation had seen the creation of the so-called "Yellow Card," otherwise known as the "Instructions by the Director of Operations for Opening Fire," which sought to define the concept of reasonable force in the prevention of crime, setting out rules on opening fire with and without warning. In reference to the latter, soldiers could fire without warning

Either when hostile firing is taking place in your area, and a warning is impracticable, or when any delay could lead to death or serious injury to people whom it is your duty to protect or to yourself, and then only: (a) against a person using a firearm against members of the security forces or against people whom it is your duty to protect; (b) against a person carrying a firearm if you have reason to think he is about to use it for offensive purposes.<sup>49</sup>

### Minimum Force in Light of Controversial Killings

The death of Daniel O'Hagan in July 1970, shot by troops of the King's Own Scottish Borderers during riots in Belfast's New Lodge, prompted the issuance of a printed version of the Yellow Card to soldiers. O'Hagan's death again emphasized the inability of troops on active operations to adhere to minimum force directives. Journalist Kevin Myers noted that the general population was starting to feel "that soldiers were immune to laws that governed the civil population."<sup>50</sup> This was observed in the 2010 Saville Report into the deaths of Bloody Sunday, which, to Myers, drew attention to an agreement between the army command and the RUC which in effect "removed soldiers from the normal operation of the criminal justice system and involved the establishment of an alternative structure operated and controlled by the military."<sup>51</sup> It felt that this contributed "to a culture within

<sup>48</sup>Lieutenant General Sir Alistair Irwin, interview with author, Aberlour, 16 February 2009.

<sup>49</sup>Belfast, United Kingdom, Linen Hall Library Political Collection, LHLPC, Army Cuttings, Box 2, Instructions by the Director of Operations for Opening Fire in Northern Ireland, Restricted Document, November 1971.

<sup>50</sup>Kevin Myers, *Watching the Door: A Memoir, 1971–1978* (Dublin: Lilliput 2006), 140.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

which soldiers could shoot, and kill, with impunity” because they knew their use of lethal force would not be subject to scrutiny.<sup>52</sup>

The security operation in Northern Ireland became more challenging over the course of 1970. The curfew imposed in the Lower Falls Road area in July was deeply divisive and the volume of military injuries soared, from 54 in 1969 to 620 in 1970, whilst the number of shootings and bombings increased from 73 and ten, respectively, to 213 and 170, respectively.<sup>53</sup> As a result, the Yellow Card was revised in January 1971 and opened up a number of scenarios where soldiers could open fire whilst on duty. The elasticity of the rules of engagement emphasized the fact that previous directives had proven impracticable. These situations included someone carrying a firearm and believed to be about to use it, someone refusing to halt when ordered to do so, and petrol bombers, provided a clear warning was issued first. There was significant scope for diverse interpretations of these regulations, as evident in the fatal shooting of William Halligan, an alleged nail bomber, by troops of 3 Para in March 1971. The regiment had previously stated its confidence that the mere fact of its presence would halt attacks on social security staff and firefighters.<sup>54</sup> Halligan’s family were later awarded compensation.<sup>55</sup>

The situation continued to deteriorate over the summer of 1971. Events that summer proved decisive in the rupture between the nationalist communities of Northern Ireland and the British military. In June, Parachute Regiment soldiers were advised that new orders on opening fire should be displayed prominently in barracks and a reminder was issued on the importance of adhering to the Yellow Card when opening fire.<sup>56</sup> The implication was that more visible rules for opening fire were now necessary in order to tackle the proclivity of troops to open fire on duty.

The deaths of Seamus Cusack and Desmond Beattie, shot dead in separate but related incidents in Derry on 8 July, drew questions over the ability and desire of British soldiers to adhere to minimum force principles as defined in the Yellow Card.<sup>57</sup> During enquiries into the deaths, the soldiers responsible for the fatal shootings claimed that both men were armed, Cusack with a gun and Beattie with a projectile that could have been an explosive.<sup>58</sup> Four weeks later,

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<sup>52</sup>Saville Inquiry, Vol. 9, Para 194:12, 235.

<sup>53</sup>Data from the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

<sup>54</sup>LHLPC, Arms Misc. Box 1, Major E.M. Edwards, O.C. 3 Para, “A Personal Message to the People of Ballymurphy,” undated.

<sup>55</sup>David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton, and David McVea, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream 2008), 69.

<sup>56</sup>Airborne Forces Archive Folder Number 2/33/1, Administration Instructions, 7 June 1971 and Operational Instructions, 7 June 1971.

<sup>57</sup>Inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Seamus Cusack and George Desmond Beattie, Chairman: Lord Gifford, August 1971, <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/docs/gifford/gifford71.htm>>.

<sup>58</sup>McKittrick et al., *Lost Lives*, 75–78.

van driver Harry Thornton was killed in Belfast after his van backfired and a soldier responded by opening fire. Thornton's companion was arrested and suffered injuries at the hands of the arresting officers. In June 1972 two RUC officers were acquitted on charges of assaulting the companion and two years later the MoD awarded Thornton's widow agreed damages of £27,000.<sup>59</sup> Violence in the aftermath of these deaths put further pressure on soldiers and further challenged the principles of the Yellow Card, amendments of which could not be implemented quickly enough. This emphasized the constant need to redefine what constituted minimum force during this period in Northern Ireland.

This sequence of events would seem to run contrary to the concept of minimum force, with interpretations of what constituted minimum force increasingly fluid as the security situation in Northern Ireland escalated. Reflecting on his early experiences of Operation *Banner*, a former member of 1 Para recalled,

there was an incredible change in the attitude during the course of 1970, and I think it stemmed to a large extent from disillusionment. The first time we went in there, October '69 to February 1970, there had been this feeling of hope, but by September that year the frustrations had set in on the street and of course that was another fillip to the rioting.<sup>60</sup>

The ambiguity of the subject of his statement is significant. One interpretation might be that this soldier is referring to the attitude of the general public in Northern Ireland; another that it was the attitude of his regiment that had changed. Certainly the attitude of soldiers toward the situation facing them in Northern Ireland changed dramatically after the deaths of the first troops in combat during Operation *Banner*.

### Minimum Force after the First Military Deaths

Another Para recalled the death of Gunner Robert Curtis, shot by the IRA in North Belfast on 6 February 1971: "my reaction the day Gunner Curtis was killed was, 'it wasn't me.' I think that's how we all felt. We realised things were getting worse, and I think what hit us harder was when those three young Jocks got murdered in March."<sup>61</sup> The deaths of teenage brothers John and Joseph McCaig and their colleague Dougald McCaughey, all members of the Royal Highland Fusiliers, on 10 March 1971, lured from Belfast city centre to a remote hillside in northwest Belfast and shot in the back of the head at the side of a road, changed the dynamics of the way

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 78–79.

<sup>60</sup>Max Arthur, *Northern Ireland Soldiers Talking: 1969 to Today* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson 1987), 34.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 42.

soldiers could relax off duty. A Corporal from 2 Para recalled, “things had escalated: there was no more discos. It was getting serious.”<sup>62</sup>

The escalation of the conflict by the Provisional IRA, reflected in the deaths of troops both on and off duty, raises an interesting question about the ability of soldiers to continue to operate on minimum force principles when their opponent, or enemy, in a conflict is not subject to the rule of law or minimum force principles. The Parachute Regiment became conscious of this, noting that

As the troubles continue to escalate there is little doubt in our minds that it is not the Shankill loyalist and our many ex-Servicemen friends with whom we shall do battle; it is the provisional groups of the IRA now recognisably active. Minimum force will continue to be our watchword but as soldiers’ lives are in danger shooting may be the only solution to the sniper, nail bomber and arsonist.<sup>63</sup>

This comment, published in April 1971, is notable for its identification of the wider loyalist community as an aligned group despite the significant paramilitary activity that would develop in this community with the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association. Indeed, it had been members of the former group who had committed the first murders of the Northern Ireland troubles. Also significant was the comment, in a 1972 review of operations, that “we must never move away from the principle of minimum force ... a few broken heads early on, even a few deaths would have been a small price to pay for a quick and ruthless victory.”<sup>64</sup> Adding the “quick and ruthless victory” caveat rather muddled the consistency of the application of minimum force principles.

### Minimum Force and Internment without Trial

The Provisional IRA becoming increasingly active through the early months of 1971, and pressure grew on the governments of Northern Ireland and Great Britain to act decisively against them, particularly after the murders of the Fusiliers. This raised the question of the influence of political demand for an effective response on the part of the military on how troops carried out their orders. Did external pressure prompt troops to revert from the “trained-down” strategy of Northern Ireland in favour of a higher-intensity approach that would, in turn, change de facto interpretations of minimum force? This certainly was evident in the arrest operations that followed the introduction of internment without trial, which was brought back to Northern Ireland for the first time since the IRA’s 1956–62 border campaign in August 1971 in the form of Operation *Demetrius*.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>63</sup>*Pegasus* 26/2 (1971), 24.

<sup>64</sup>DEFE 48/256, Defence Operational Analysis Establishment Memorandum 7221, D.G. Smith, J.D. Watson, E.P.J. Harrison, “A Survey of Military Opinion on Current Internal Security Doctrine and Methods based on Experience in Northern Ireland,” October 1972, 49.

It had been effective against the IRA during the 1950s, but the enactment of the policy in 1971 brought violence to the streets of Northern Ireland. Once again the Parachute Regiment assumed a leading role. The first stage of Operation *Demetrius* was a large-scale arrest operation, with soldiers in the role of arresting officers. Violence flared as the local communities reacted to the mass appearance of soldiers in their areas. Twenty-four people died in violence between 9 and 11 August 1971.

The soldiers of 1 Para were assigned the republican stronghold of the Ballymurphy estate in west Belfast, led by Lieutenant Colonel Derek Wilford. Wilford later boasted that “we don’t deal in a body count like the American Army but we know that we have killed many more IRA men than we have found bodies.”<sup>65</sup> Solicitor, author and former Para Henry Gow, writing as Harry McCallion, wrote that a fellow soldier reported that the IRA were handing out weapons to locals who were not even volunteers, a story that seems unlikely given the limited arsenal the republicans had at that point. He further claimed that the soldier who shot dead Father Hugh Mullan had seen the priest reach for a weapon lying beside a man whom he was aiding, before killing the priest with an aimed shot.<sup>66</sup> The opportunity to engage in direct confrontation was, nonetheless, clearly welcomed across the regiment. A former captain in 1 Para recalled the pent-up aggression of the soldiers:

The boys of course relished it ... To the professional soldier the whole question of operating in a constrained environment, as Northern Ireland must be, is very difficult: if, for whatever reasons, some of these constraints are removed, and certainly during internment the constraints were removed by the action of the opposition, the better they liked it, because they felt able to operate in a more open environment and hence more as soldiers and less as policemen.<sup>67</sup>

This comment alludes to the lack of adherence to the principles of the Yellow Card, and the wider issue of minimum force, during the post-internment violence. The opportunity to return fire enabled some soldiers to take on the IRA directly, perhaps the first such opportunity for many. A member of 2 Para recalled opening fire from the Henry Taggart Hall on a marksman crouching behind the inadequate cover of a dustbin. “The first thing we did was put down fire into it – that bloke ceased firing. He was a sitting duck.” The same soldier also spoke of shooting at a woman: “she was firing a pistol and she was taken out too. I know it sounds callous, but the enemy is the enemy, whether a man or a woman: if she’s got a weapon in her hands and she’s going to take me out, do I take her out? Of course I do.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>*Belfast Telegraph*, 21 September 1971.

<sup>66</sup>McCallion, *Killing Zone*, 48.

<sup>67</sup>Arthur, *Northern Ireland Soldiers Talking*, 58.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

The only female death recorded by *Lost Lives* for 9 August in Ballymurphy was that of 50-year-old mother of eight Joan Connolly. During a 1976 hearing, a judge noted the army's claim, contested by her family, that Mrs Connolly had been part of a group directing fire at them, ruling that any probable truth "lay between the two versions."<sup>69</sup> The hardline approach of soldiers on the night of 9 August had, for one member of 2 Para, been decisive against what he viewed as an incompetent opponent: "They were fighting for their ideals, I suppose, retaliating for us lifting their men, but six or so blokes running across open ground in broad daylight, trying to take out scores of soldiers behind sandbagged positions, ludicrous. The IRA never made a section attack again. They learned their lesson then, I would say."<sup>70</sup> This was also the sentiment in *Pegasus*, which reported "open warfare" and noted that "a state of turmoil and major disorders were reported from all parts of the Battalion area." A report in the journal also suggested that "the IRA did exactly what we wanted them to, and came out on to the streets to engage us in open gun battles. Their stupidly suicidal attacks on the B Company position in Ballymurphy resulted in heavy casualties."<sup>71</sup> The expectation of this level of violence was evident in a letter sent to the families of 1 Para soldiers, resident on the outskirts of Belfast at Holywood Barracks, which discouraged them from visiting Belfast.<sup>72</sup>

Allegations of brutality on the part of Paras continued throughout 1971. Elizabeth McCabe, the mother of Trooper Hugh McCabe, a Belfast Catholic soldier who had been home on leave from West Germany when he was shot dead by the RUC during violence in the Lower Falls area of Belfast early on the morning of 15 August 1969. In late 1971, Mrs McCabe claimed that a patrol had beaten her during a search operation. It was reported that a neighbour who came to her assistance was struck with a rifle butt. It is certainly clear that minimum force principles could quite easily be adhered to during search operations.

Stormont MP for Belfast Falls Paddy Devlin noted "that Mrs McCabe's injuries and medical condition at present are the living proof of a case that has to be answered and answered properly by the British Army."<sup>73</sup> Another story in the *Irish Independent* reported that the Paras had hit a mother of 11 from Andersonstown in the face with a rubber bullet, blinding her for life.<sup>74</sup> *The Guardian* noted that "local people have blamed the Paratroop Regiment for the incident but have praised unanimously the other soldiers involved in the operation."<sup>75</sup>

Those other soldiers were, according to reports in the *Irish News* and *Daily Telegraph* in early 1972, requesting that the Paras be kept out of their areas

<sup>69</sup>McKittrick et al, *Lost Lives*, 83–84.

<sup>70</sup>Arthur, *Northern Ireland*, 62.

<sup>71</sup>*Pegasus* 26/3 (1971), 8–9.

<sup>72</sup>Airborne Forces Archive Folder Number 2/33/1, Letter from Major PS Field to all 1 PARA families, 9 August 1971.

<sup>73</sup>*Irish Times*, 25 November 1971.

<sup>74</sup>*Irish Independent*, 8 November 1971.

<sup>75</sup>*The Guardian*, 5 November 1971.



because they were “too rough and on occasions brutal.”<sup>76</sup> Reporting in *The Guardian*, Simon Hoggart noted that “since the requests were made, paratroops have not been used in those sensitive areas of Belfast which, it is now believed, are beginning to calm down ... Undoubtedly the regiment is the one most hated by Catholics in troubled areas where among local people at any rate it has a reputation for unnecessary brutality.”<sup>77</sup> Certainly, those in the IRA recognized this quality within the regiment. Gerard Hodgins: “Paratroopers were just paratroopers, nasty fuckers and that’s it.”<sup>78</sup> A resident of the Ardoyne commented, “they weren’t as bad as we thought they would be ... they were worse. They ruled by fear.”<sup>79</sup>

Hoggart continued that officers “wading into people as if this were jungle warfare simply isn’t on in Belfast,” further noting that “Local residents alleged, paratroops had fired rubber bullets into a peaceful crowd of young children who a few minutes earlier had been playing and joking with men of the Royal Artillery.”<sup>80</sup>

### Bloody Sunday and the Abandonment of Minimum Force Principles?

There were still, however, violent protests across Northern Ireland as opposition to internment grew increasingly organized. On 17 January 1972 a new internment camp opened at Magilligan Point, located east of Londonderry and 1 Para was assigned to the area in support of the Second Battalion of the Royal Green Jackets. As soon as the camp opened, the Civil Rights Association announced a protest to be held at the camp the following weekend.<sup>81</sup> The headline in the *Irish Times* on Monday 24 January – “Baton-swinging troops fight off Magilligan marchers” – told a story, with 4000 protesters dispersed by soldiers using CS gas and rubber bullets.<sup>82</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Derek Wilford defended his men, arguing that “the Paras are tough men ... never brutal.”<sup>83</sup> This was not a view shared by the regiment they were assisting at Magilligan: a captain from the Royal Green Jackets was later quoted as saying that at Magilligan “the Paras were called forward to stop [the protesters], and in my opinion did so in a manner far too aggressive for the situation, in a way perhaps more suited to Belfast.”<sup>84</sup> This contrasted sharply with the report in *Pegasus*:

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<sup>76</sup>*Irish News*, 26 January 1972; *Daily Telegraph*, 14 January 1972.

<sup>77</sup>*The Guardian*, 25 January 1972.

<sup>78</sup>Gerard Hodgins, interview with author, 25 March 2010.

<sup>79</sup>*Belfast Telegraph*, 25 July 1973.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup>*Irish Times*, 20 January 1972.

<sup>82</sup>*Irish Times*, 24 January 1972.

<sup>83</sup>*News Letter*, 26 January 1972.

<sup>84</sup>Arthur, *Northern Ireland Soldiers Talking*, 70.

the Civil Rights are at it again – 1972. C Company went to Magilligan and hit the headlines after hitting some hooligans who were determined to break into camp. A soldier kicked a civilian; it was seen on television and so there was a row. Not about the attempt by several hundred to maim soldiers, but about that one kick! There is no wonder that the soldiers wonder.<sup>85</sup>

A further protest march was organized for Derry city the following weekend and Wilford immediately received verbal warning that 1 Para would be deployed for the march.<sup>86</sup> There was already much evidence that the likely response of the soldiers of 1 Para to any violent protest would be with more violence. The Derry march drew more than 20,000 protesters, was turned back from the city centre, and turned instead toward the nationalist area of the Bogside, where a rally at the famous Free Derry corner was planned. After a shot was fired at troops around 3.45 p.m., the Support Company of 1 Para were ordered into the Bogside to begin an arrest operation around 4.07 p.m. By 4.40 p.m. 13 people were dead, one fatally wounded, and a further 14 injured.

Reflecting on the episode, one soldier from 1 Para commented that “‘Bloody Sunday’ ... was ... a high-risk operation ... [my] gut feeling was that it wouldn’t be as simple as the orders in black-and-white suggested.”<sup>87</sup> Another added that “‘When the gunmen realised they’d got the worst of it, they packed up and left. Once the people in the streets started seeing dead bodies, the rioting stopped – they were petrified.”<sup>88</sup>

One might, of course, reasonably expect that the sight of dead bodies would petrify civil rights protesters. After the original report, headed by Lord Chief Justice Widgery, into the events of Bloody Sunday simply commented that the actions of the soldiers had “bordered on the reckless,” a second inquiry was eventually announced by British Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998, headed by Lord Saville of Newdigate. It gathered evidence from January 1998 until November 2004 and eventually published its findings in June 2010, which concluded that the soldiers from 1 Para had lost control and shot dead civilians who posed no threat to them. This report, though not itself critical of the original tribunal, effectively superseded the findings of Lord Widgery.<sup>89</sup> The comments of Lord Widgery are, however, significant for the purposes of this assessment of the behaviour of the Parachute Regiment in Northern Ireland. Given the Widgery report was overwhelmingly favourable toward the soldiers, it was significant that

<sup>85</sup>*Pegasus* 27/2 (1972), 6.

<sup>86</sup>*Irish Times*, 25 January 1972; Bloody Sunday Inquiry, Evidence of Derek Wilford, <<http://report.bloody-sunday-inquiry.org/evidence/B/B944.pdf>>.

<sup>87</sup>Arthur, *Northern Ireland Soldiers Talking*, 70.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>89</sup>Report of the tribunal appointed to inquire into the events on Sunday, 30 January 1972, which led to the loss of life in connection with the procession in Londonderry on that day by the Rt Hon. Lord Widgery, OBE, TD (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office 1972); Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry by the Rt Hon. Lord Saville of Newdigate (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office 2010), <<http://www.bloody-sunday-inquiry.org.uk>>.

Widgery even used the expression “bordered on the reckless” to describe their actions.<sup>90</sup> Another significant excerpt from the Widgery report is this:

It was suggested that 1 Para had been specially brought to Londonderry because they were known to be the roughest and toughest unit in Northern Ireland and it was intended to use them in one of two ways: either to flush out any IRA gunmen in the Bogside and destroy them by superior training and fire power; or to send a punitive force into the Bogside to give the residents a rough handling and discourage them from making or supporting further attacks on the troops.<sup>91</sup>

Widgery, while quick to note that 1 Para was chosen for the arrest operation because they were uncommitted to other duties, did not refute the assertion that the unit was the “roughest and toughest” available. Further, he noted that “other circumstances which suggest that 1 Para moved without orders are less easily explained,” though he allows a significant benefit of the doubt in his report, and does not criticize the unit on these grounds. Reporters in *Pegasus* adopted a similar tone:

the events at Magilligan in mid-January involving C Company resulted in an inordinate amount of publicity, mostly of an adverse nature. Some of the national press and most of the republican press attempted to undermine the confidence of the Army and the Government in 1PARA. It was encouraging to receive letters and telegrams of support from all levels throughout the world.<sup>92</sup>

They also noted increased threats to their own security after Bloody Sunday.<sup>93</sup> The question of how the regiment could possibly respond to these threats is worth considering given the continual threat to troops in Northern Ireland. It was, from the perspective of 1 Para at least, inconsequential. Soon after Bloody Sunday, “the 1st Battalion return to Aldershot after a strenuous and difficult tour of almost two years in Northern Ireland ... Congratulations to the 1st and 2nd Battalions on a job well done.”<sup>94</sup> There is no doubt that the tour was both strenuous and difficult, though the concept of a “job well done” is clearly more debateable. Journalist John Chartres noted that the actions of the regiment had served to undermine the work of other soldiers elsewhere in Northern Ireland:

the emotional hatred within the Roman Catholic community which was been built up against the Parachute Regiment after yesterday's events in Londonderry and earlier allegations that parachutists were the wrong type

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<sup>90</sup>For more on Widgery, see Martin McCleery, *Operation Demetrius and Its Aftermath: A New History of the Use of Internment without Trial in Northern Ireland, 1971–75* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2015), 72.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>*Pegasus* 27/3 (1972), 20–21.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>94</sup>*Pegasus* 27/2 (1972), 2.

of troops to use in the Ulster situation is obviously going to create yet more difficulties for the British Army in its unhappy role here ... [1 Para] has carried out an important long-term community relations operation within the city of Belfast for the past 18 months and its links with the more militant elements of the Protestant population have in my opinion made a large contribution towards the fact that there has not yet been a serious Protestant backlash within the city.<sup>95</sup>

Widgery had devoted a section of his report to the question of “were the soldiers justified in firing?” in which he concluded that the Yellow Card did not need to be redefined, though he also commented that “it would be optimistic to suppose that every soldier could be trained to understand them in detail and apply them rigidly,” continuing that

Soldiers will react to the situations in which they find themselves in different ways according to their temperament and to the prevailing circumstances. The more intensive the shooting or stone-throwing which is going on the more ready will they be to interpret the Yellow Card as permitting them to open fire. The individual soldier’s reaction may also be affected by the general understanding of these problems which prevails in his unit. In the Parachute Regiment, at any rate in the 1st Battalion, the soldiers are trained to take what may be described as a hard line upon these questions. The events of 30 January and the attitude of individual soldiers whilst giving evidence suggest that when engaging an identified gunman or bomb-thrower they shoot to kill and continue to fire until the target disappears or falls. When under attack and returning fire they show no particular concern for the safety of others in the vicinity of the target. They are aware that civilians who do not wish to be associated with violence tend to make themselves scarce at the first alarm and they know that it is the deliberate policy of gunmen to use civilians as cover. Further, when hostile firing is taking place the soldiers of 1 Para will fire on a person who appears to be using a firearm against them without always waiting until they can positively identify the weapon. A more restrictive interpretation of the terms of the Yellow Card by 1 Para might have saved some of the casualties on 30 January, but with correspondingly increased risk to the soldiers themselves.<sup>96</sup>

This passage was significant, effectively confirming, even in an official report that was seen as favourable toward soldiers to the extent of being considered a “whitewash” by critics, the concept of minimum force was not being adhered to by the soldiers of the Parachute Regiment. General Sir Michael Carver, the Chief of the General Staff, sent a message to the troops, reassuring them that the report noted that “if no operation specifically to arrest hooligans had been launched, the day might have passed off without serious incident; but also makes abundantly clear what a menace the

<sup>95</sup>*The Times* 1 February 1972.

<sup>96</sup>Report of the tribunal appointed to inquire into the events on Sunday, 30 January 1972, which led to the loss of life in connection with the procession in Londonderry on that day by the Rt Hon. Lord Widgery.

hooligans in Londonderry had become, and that there would have been no deaths if an illegal march had not been organised.”<sup>97</sup>

IRA violence increased after Bloody Sunday, one particularly notorious incident being the bombing of the Abercorn Restaurant in central Belfast on 4 March 1972. Taking place at 4.30 p.m., it was an attack designed to cause maximum carnage, with two deaths and over one hundred injuries. A soldier serving with the Parachute Regiment at the time recalled, “I will never forget the black heart of the Provisional IRA and I will never forget what they did.”<sup>98</sup>

Shortly before 1 Para concluded their residential tour at Holywood Barracks in May 1972, they were involved in the killing of prominent Official IRA member Joe McCann on 15 April 1972. The unarmed McCann was stopped by an army roadblock and placed under arrest. He ran and was shot dead by soldiers, reports suggesting that he had been shot repeatedly at close range. Much violence followed this killing and the Paras shot Patrick Magee on 17 April 1972 as he was leaving St Comgall’s School on the Falls Road, where he was on teaching placement. The *Irish Times* noted that this story gave “rise to considerable concern about the firing orders under which the soldiers now operate in the North.”<sup>99</sup> Two nights previously, soldiers from the Parachute Regiment had used a rocket launcher to explode a car bomb.<sup>100</sup>

In January 2013, the Police Service of Northern Ireland’s Historical Enquiries Team (HET) issued a report into the death of Joe McCann. Excerpts of this report are available through the Pat Finucane Centre, a human rights advocacy and lobbying organization named after a prominent Belfast solicitor who was shot dead by loyalist paramilitaries in 1989. The excerpts note that, “even though one of the soldiers said he thought Joe was leading them into an ambush, the HET considers that Joe’s actions did not amount to the level of specific threat which could have justified the soldiers opening fire in accordance with the army rules of engagement.”<sup>101</sup>

Upon completing their controversial residential tour on 25 May 1972, 1 Para were relieved at Holywood Barracks by the Prince of Wales’s Own Regiment of Yorkshire, of which Michael Sullivan was part. He recalled,

We handed over to the Argylls in Crater in ‘65–‘66 [and] there was a word throughout the battalion that “ok, we’ve got to go back and sort out the mess

<sup>97</sup>Airborne Forces Archive Folder Number 2/33/2, Message to the Army from General Sir Michael Carver GCB, CBE, DSO, MC ADC (Gen), Chief of the General Staff, on the findings of the Widgey Report (Broadcast by the BFBS on 19 April 1972).

<sup>98</sup>Quoted in Ken Wharton, *The Bloodiest Year 1972: British Soldiers in Northern Ireland in Their Own Words* (Stroud: History Press 2011), 38.

<sup>99</sup>*Irish Times*, 17 April 1972.

<sup>100</sup>*Daily Telegraph*, 14 April 1972.

<sup>101</sup>Excerpt from the Historical Enquiries Team report into the death of Joe McCann, <[http://www.patfinucanecentre.org/cases/JoeMcCann\\_HET.pdf](http://www.patfinucanecentre.org/cases/JoeMcCann_HET.pdf)>.

that the Argylls have made through stupid Mitchell being a cowboy and going crazy down in Crater” [In 1972] the sense was “shit, we’ve got to go back in Belfast now and sort it out after 1Para have cocked it up in Londonderry – cowboys.”<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

The Parachute Regiment’s three battalions completed a total of 31 tours of duty during Operation *Banner*. Before the operation ended, it had received over 40 gallantry awards, 180 other honours, and 60 mentions in dispatches. These repeated tours took their toll. In 1973 wives of members of the Second Battalion complained about it being deployed to Northern Ireland more than other units.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps in response to this, in mid-1973, the MoD announced that “on present planning, and apart from unforeseen emergencies, the 2nd Bn. The Parachute Regiment, will not be returning to Northern Ireland in the foreseeable future on completion of its current tour.”<sup>104</sup>

Senior soldiers unaffiliated with the regiment like Brigadier Charles Ritchie, who served with both the Royal Scots and later as the head of the Ulster Defence Regiment, defended the Paras:

The Paras are excellent but they’re very hard-line, if there’s a really tough job, give it to the Paras and they’ll parachute in and they’ll do it but remember how we’re trained – we’re trained that if you’re fired on, you fire back in the general direction where the shots came from to put the enemy off because if you fire at somebody and they fire back at you, you don’t know if the next bullet’s got your name on it or not so we had quite a lot of adjusting to do and we basically deployed the same tactics of crowd control that we did in Aden in 1965.<sup>105</sup>

Others, like Brigadier Ian Gardiner, were less complimentary. He commented on the ethos within his Royal Marines compared with the Parachute Regiment:

Our ethos was very different from theirs, it still is. Our training is as tough as you’ll get but it’s also thoughtful. Once we’ve an intake our aim is to bring every man up to the standard we want. We help them to get there. We want them if they want to join us and wear the green beret. The Paras were far too rough, too ready to get stuck in when there was no need.<sup>106</sup>

Indeed, he suggests that had the Royal Marines been on duty in Londonderry on 30 January 1972, Bloody Sunday would never have

<sup>102</sup>Major M.L. Sullivan, interview with author, 24 May 2011.

<sup>103</sup>*Belfast Telegraph*, 8 May 1973.

<sup>104</sup>*The Guardian*, 12 May 1973; *News Letter*, 12 May 1973.

<sup>105</sup>Brigadier Charles Ritchie CBE, interview with author, 26 August 2010.

<sup>106</sup>Brigadier Ian Gardiner, interview with author, 19 July 2007.

happened. A former Grenadier Guardsman recalled, "They were very good soldiers, there's no question, but we were very much more to do with hearts and minds, getting amongst the locals and talking to them whereas for the Paras, that wasn't so high on their agenda."<sup>107</sup> Another former Grenadier Guard opined,

I think you need to understand the internal culture of the Parachute Regiment. Without having served with them, I am sure they have a more aggressive culture as part of their training. They do get themselves to a very high level of fitness and readiness but with that goes a level of aggression which perhaps makes them less useful in internal security and rather better on open operations. It's a very difficult balance with any soldier; the balance between the need to be aggressive in order to fight and in internal security to be very disciplined and fair.<sup>108</sup>

In other more traditional conflict situations, the regiment has served with distinction, notably in Afghanistan. It remains to be seen, however, whether or not it was well suited to the sensitive community policing that was an important part of its role in Northern Ireland. It was considered by Kevin Myers to have been "by far and away the least successful British army regiment to have served in Northern Ireland. Other regiments might have suffered more casualties, none served as such an efficient recruiting sergeant for the IRA."<sup>109</sup>

This nastiness, admittedly perceived by a member of the Provisional IRA, reflects both an operation strength and yet a serious weakness of the use of the Parachute Regiment in Northern Ireland. The sensitive nature of the "hearts and minds" operation that the original task, as aid to the civil power, required was completely contrary to the ethos of the regiment. The regiment was raised, trained, deployed, and rewarded for its quick and ruthless action; a highly capable war-making machine. This paper has discussed the early years of Operation *Banner*, focusing on the activities of the Parachute Regiment and, through first-hand accounts, has shown that the aggression inherent to the unit was too frequently witnessed in the regiment's dealings with the general public. As a result of their aggression, the soldiers of the regiment were often too quick to respond to situations that presented themselves with increased frequency in Northern Ireland with the use of deadly force. In many cases, these responses were in direct contravention of the Yellow Card, a document created for the purpose of controlling the circumstances under which soldiers could open fire. As many soldiers noted, the Yellow Card was considered to be overly restrictive in a particularly fluid campaign where troops were forced to react to a sudden change in circumstances in an effective manner.

<sup>107</sup>Former captain and operations officer, Grenadier Guards, interview with author, 19 August 2011.

<sup>108</sup>Former captain and regimental intelligence officer, Grenadier Guards, interview with author, 19 August 2011.

<sup>109</sup>*Irish Times*, 4 February 1995.

The inability to define the rules of engagement so as to provide soldiers with an accurate Yellow Card was typical of the early mistakes made in the administration of Operation *Banner*. The reasons for this constant revision were manifold, but centre on two issues: a government that continued to misunderstand the nature of the conflict that had developed in Northern Ireland; and a military force that was unprepared for the role of community police. The decision to deploy the Parachute Regiment so frequently during the earliest years of Operation *Banner* can be viewed as a quick-fix solution; a deliberate attempt to quickly suppress any possible insurgency through aggressive and decisive military intervention. The top-down aggressive strategy, delivered in uncompromising fashion by the Parachute Regiment, proved disastrous.

The Parachute Regiment were far from the only regiment to be criticized for failing to adhere to principles of minimum force in their duties in Northern Ireland, but the timing of their actions, occurring early in the operation and coinciding with the introduction of security measures that are widely considered to have been damaging to relations between the military and the nationalist community of Northern Ireland, had a particularly destructive effect. The ability to operate using minimum force principles is dependent on both the willingness and the ability of the soldiers on duty to adhere to them. Frequently throughout the period covered in this article, neither was possible.

### Notes on contributor

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