The conflict in Northern Ireland

A soldier's insight

Jon Hyslop and Jonathan Jackson

Submission date: 10 February 2024; Acceptance date: 8 March 2024; Publication date: 30 May 2024

Abstract

War is the most destructive of human actions, leaving a legacy of hatred, violence, and destruction which can often take decades to rebuild. The victims of war are endless, from those directly involved in the chaos, to the generations that follow and attempt to rebuild their shattered lives. Many experiences of the victims of war remain largely undiagnosed or even recognized, producing feelings of shame and fear that create the conditions for new conflicts to emerge. Academia is more than just analyzing data; it is the creation of a space in which to allow the recording of stories and reflections of those involved in major historical episodes. The piece hopes to provide an opportunity for just one military voice from the complex and chaotic period of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland to speak and share their reflections to help understand the human cost of war.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, soldier, war, memories, trauma

At the dawn of the 20th century, the French criminologist, Dr. Edmund Locard argued for a radical new form of investigation. The *Locard principle* suggests that any person who commits an offense will not only bring something to the crime scene but leave with something from it, with both being used as forensic evidence. The concept that human interactions leave a trace, can be applied to a range of different fields of study. The end of the 19th century would see an explosion in scientific discovery, shaping and impacting the lives of those at the time but also subsequent generations. These pioneering leaps in industrial output would see horses replaced by combustion engines, workers replaced by machines and a violent increase in the destructive capabilities of weaponry. Just as in forensic science, wherever conflict emerges, it will always leave a trace, often in the form of devastating human casualties, and victims with both physical and mental scars. It is often the invisible injuries which become the most invasive to the lives of those who have been affected by war, remaining for many

Jon Hyslop is Lecturer in Criminology, Investigation and Policing at Leeds Trinity University.
Email: j.hyslop@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Jonathan Jackson is Associate Professor in Policing at Leeds Trinity University and member of the Ethical Support Alliance.
Email: Jo.Jackson@leedstrinity.ac.uk

DOI:10.13169/jglobfaul.11.1.0066

decades after the physical damage has recovered. The size and scale of the major industrial conflicts of the last two centuries have inevitably escalated the numbers of human casualties and seen many more victims left behind, receiving little support, and turning instead to self-medicated methods of easing their pain. The 20th century remains a period of immense large- and small-scale conflicts, with the latter often being the result of the former. The divisions and rise of national identities that resulted from the collapse of many European empire states at the end of the Great War in 1918, was one of these flashpoints, which would see the division of the Irish State into a Republic and a collection of six "loyalist" northern counties remaining part of the United Kingdom. The simmering tensions which continued long after 1921, would emerge again in the latter half of the century, in a period which became known as "the Troubles". This article will provide a first-hand account and insight into those "Troubles" from the perspective of a British soldier tasked to try and keep the peace in a complex and uncertain environment. It seeks not to place blame, criticism or act out of bias but instead simply provide a platform for just one person to tell their story.

Context of the conflict

When exploring the violence associated with the period of "the Troubles", we must recognize that as with all conflicts, the roots lay deep. The years between 1960 to 1998, saw the six counties engulfed by religious and political divisions, leading to the deployment of soldiers from mainland Britain to manage the escalating tensions (Hayes & McAllister, 2001; Smith, 1999). The first immediate question raised by such a decision, centers on the use of military personnel with an essential "policing operation" and whether the ideologies of these two concepts are themselves compatible. The increased deployment of troops on the streets of Northern Ireland certainly marked a rise in the opposition to them, with Bloody Sunday in 1972 standing as a testament to the problems associated with the use of men and women, trained to engage, and destroy an enemy, deployed to carry out a peacekeeping function. The multitude of "terrorist" groups and their subsequent splinter factions would see a wave of murder, targeted killings, and bombings across Britain and Ireland (Collier & Hoeffler, 2001). This article is not designed to provide an in-depth analysis of the conflict but instead hopes to provide a snapshot of the experiences of one person during this monumental historical period.

The roots of "the Troubles" stretch to at least the 15th century, with separation, isolation, and subjection of communities lying at the heart of an entrenched legacy of hate (Kelley, 1988: 7). The Fenian question took on an increasingly "terrorist" flavor throughout the final decades of the 19th century, with demands for Irish independence growing apace, amplified by a domestic bombing campaign. The collapse of the colonial rules-based order after the First World War would see Britain struggle to maintain dominance over its dominions 2 (Kelley, 1988: 18). The Easter Uprising of 1917 and the martyrdom of many of its participants, had begun a chain of events which would lead to the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921). The response from the British government followed its usual imperialist pattern, relying upon the oppressive actions of both regular and guerrilla forces and the barbarous tactics of Black and Tan units, to regain control.

Large-scale Irish public demand for independence would eventually lead to the formation of a Republic under the Government of Ireland in 1920 but ceding the northern six counties to remain under the control of the United Kingdom. This ceding of territory was based largely on demographics, with the majority protestant population identifying more with mainland Britain rather than the fledgling Irish nation (McGarry, 2001). The second Irish conflict which erupted in the final years of the 1960s is often associated with religious tensions but owed more to economic, political, and nationalist factors (Alcock, 1994: 42–44). The decades of oppression toward the minority catholic communities led to the formation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, whose suppression by the largely protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary, created civil riots in August 1969 and the subsequent

stationing of troops, to what would become Britain's longest military deployment (Dingley, 2001: 455). The participants in this "struggle" are largely categorized by four key paramilitary groups, with those eager to see a return to the republic (Irish Republican Army and Irish National Liberation Army) and those loyal to mainland rule (Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association). Alcock (1994) suggests the varied implementation of often controversial tactics to control the growing levels of violence differed from "peace walls" to covert surveillance, infiltration, and the practice of using specialist military teams.

The fast-paced flight through centuries of history in the previous section does not diminish the complexity and horror that formed a daily occurrence for those caught up during this time. Instead, it attempts to provide a wider context to the experiences which will be featured below. The cost of war is, as Lombard's principle shows, simply the trace of hate, suffering, fear, and hope that it leaves behind upon those who experience it. It is only through the willingness of those who were involved to share their stories, that those who follow can begin to try and understand the causes and impacts of war on human society.

A soldier's insight: Jon Hyslop

Second Royal Green Jackets Regiment in Northern Ireland 1991–1993

The Royal Green Jackets (RGJ) had a significant presence and involvement in every major conflict that Britain has had been involved in since its inception through the amalgamation of three existing regiments: the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, the Kings Royal Rifle Corps, and the Rifle Brigade. The regiment was known for its distinguished service history including involvement in numerous conflicts and operations around the world including the Napoleonic Wars, Crimean War, both World Wars, and the Falklands War as well as various peacekeeping missions including deployments to Northern Ireland.

The period known as "the Troubles" was a turbulent time in Northern Irish history and lasted from the 1960s up until the late 1990s. However, that is not to suggest that there was no violence and unrest either before or after these dates. During this time, the British Army was deployed to Northern Ireland to support the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), to assist in dealing with escalating sectarian violence between the Nationalist (Catholic) minority and the Unionist (Protestant) majority communities. The specific activities and roles of the RGJ in Northern Ireland varied over the years and depended on the evolving political situation on the ground.

In February 1991, I found myself en route to Omagh in County Tyrone, with my Battalion for a two-year posting. This, of course, was no surprise to us as a team as we had been training and preparing for the deployment over the previous year. The Battalion had been in Northern Ireland before and had already completed numerous tours in Belfast and Armagh, which became synonymous with violence and improvised explosive devices. As the newest member of the unit, I was both scared and excited at the prospect of being deployed in what the time was seen as a dangerous environment. Most of my unit had completed numerous tours and openly discussed the violence and frustrations they had encountered while on active deployment. Names like South Armagh, Derry (Londonderry), Divis Flats, Falls Road, and Shankill were openly discussed along with stories of lost comrades and close calls. These stories both excited and terrified me which in retrospect may have been its intention.

The British Army has long been good at preparing their soldiers for deployments and indeed combat, and we had spent the previous year practicing patrolling, fighting in built-up areas, marksmanship, first aid, communications, and how to deal with various incidents and attacks. The anticipation was immense as was the fear and pressure among the group. There was a desire to be tested and not to be found wanting among peers. I was haunted by thoughts as to whether I would let myself down, my family, or worse my fellow soldiers. These may seem trifling matters and childish ramblings but, in all honesty, they were real and all-encompassing at the time. I had heard of Northern Ireland and seen the devastation

the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had caused both on the streets of Ireland and mainland UK. However, my knowledge of the conflict and parties involved was limited to media coverage and moral panics within the communities in the north of England. For my fellow soldiers, Ireland and Northern Ireland were known for their violence and terrorism, in which bombing and murder were commonplace and the norm within their communities. The atrocities we saw on the news only fueled the belief that they were somehow different and dangerous with a hatred of the UK, Crown, and Armed Forces. I grew up in a relatively small northern town with its mining heritage and history and the subsequent unemployment and poverty. Drinking and violence while not commonplace were not unusual or unknown in the late 1970s and 1980s, but Northern Ireland seemed a dangerous and confusing place with its strange customs, marches, music, and hatred.

My first recollection of Northern Ireland was landing at Aldergrove Airport, which is the military side of Belfast International Airport. It is a strange yet impressive system. The military aircraft land at Belfast International but taxi to a military terminal staffed by military personnel. As we walked across the tarmac, we were ushered into a small room that had refreshments and toilets. In this room was an elderly Irish lady who blessed and thanked everyone for their service and gave each soldier a prayer card saying she would pray for our safe return to our loved ones. I guess that was the first time I was truly worried and thought how bad it must be, that this nice old lady had taken the time to greet us and now wanted to pray for me. Thoughts of the newsreels depicting explosions derelict buildings and burning cars manifested in my mind. My lack of education and knowledge of the country, believing it was a war zone. I had imagined being greeted with bombed-out buildings and vehicles lining the streets with hatred and danger around every corner.

Soon we were herded onto Chinook helicopters for the flight from Belfast to Omagh. For those who have not traveled in a military helicopter, they are both exciting and terrifying in equal measure. The pilots, Army Air Corps or RAF, have the military's sense of humor and endeavor to make the journey as exciting and as nauseating as possible. Their rationale is that they must fly tactically because of the threat from the IRA or its many factions but the troops believe it is a twisted competition to see how many they can make throw up before reaching their destination. For the aircrew and experienced colleagues, this is a sight to relish and savor as soldier after soldier vomited into sick bags, when available. There is nothing as humbling or soul-destroying as sitting on a helicopter with your pocket full of warm sick while trying to look warrior-like and channeling your inner fighter in front of the other soldiers, whom I was trying to impress.

I remember most from the journey, apart from the smell of vomit and sweat, but recall how beautiful the country was. I was shocked and a little confused to see lush green fields and beautiful hills and countryside. In my head, I was expecting to see horrific images, not beautiful countryside rivaling the lake district and highlands, with vehicles driving around as though there was no conflict. The incongruity of the scenes below and my expectations of the war zone simply remind me of the paradoxes of the conflict and the biggest human cost of war is innocence.

The scenes below and my expectations of the war zone were confusing and a little unnerving. The flight was thankfully relatively short and after about 30 minutes we landed at Lisanelly Barracks, Omagh, Co. Tyrone. The camp itself was the usual mix of soldier's quarters, Sgt.'s Mess, Officer's Mess, and married quarters with a NAFFI shop and bar. The main difference was the guard towers or sangars and the constant drone of helicopters moving troops and equipment across the province. The campgrounds were split into two and separated by a bridge over the river Strule. On the one side was Lisanelly Barracks and on the other side was St Lucia Barracks, home of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) who would regularly share their views and fists with any Rifleman that happened to be caught on the wrong side of the river.

The accommodation for the RECCE Platoon or Close Observation Platoon (COP) as it was known in Northern Ireland was adjacent to the helipad and the noise and smell of aviation fuel were constant companions throughout this posting. The accommodation was basic, to say the least, but due to the unit I was in we had two-man rooms rather than the usual four- or eight-man rooms we were accustomed to. The first couple of weeks were a mix of training and patrols to acclimatize to the area and ensure our presence was felt in the local community. These initial patrols were a mix of vehicle mobile patrols, foot patrols and helicopter patrols covering a large geographical area which encompassed both rural and urban areas. The COP were tasked with covert surveillance of suspected terrorists which often meant being either in plain clothes or living rough in rural hides along the borders, especially in areas like South Armagh. One of the benefits of being in the COP platoon, apart from no guard duties, long hair, and being allowed not to shave, was being able to visit and work in different areas and locations.

For those that have been to Northern Ireland is a truly beautiful country and the people are warm, humorous, and love a drink and party. I was always shocked by how normal life was as you drove or even patrolled through the towns and countryside. People waved, chatted, and often exchanged pleasantries and greetings. The experienced soldiers or old sweats would warn of the dangers of complacency and dropping your guard, instilling the ethos of trust no one with stories of soldiers being given drinks with broken glass in, or girls flirting with young soldiers only for them to be shot or attacked or worse, left behind and now alone. These thoughts and fears were a constant reminder of the dangers and threats that soldiers faced daily and yet most people we encountered were friendly, caring, and warm. Psychologically this was difficult to process, and the incongruity caused some young soldiers to question our role and purpose.

The reflections of soldiers in conflict are vital in understanding how and why people go to war. For some, the fear and excitement generated by military engagements can become a dangerous addiction, which erodes personal relationships and family dynamics. Some are driven by loyalty or love of the state, with troops powered by idealism and a desire to fight for a just cause. The reflections above demonstrate that soldiering is more than the skills learned in training but the mechanisms that individuals and teams develop to cope with the stresses and chaos of war. These tools of support can sometimes create cultures of tolerance and reflection, in which soldiers and officers maintain disciplined order in a largely chaotic space. However, history shows that those who fight wars can at times delve into the darkest depths of depravity in pursuit of the "enemy". War is costly in munitions and resources, but it is the damage to the persons who fight and live within them that can last decades, forming physical and invisible scars which few ever recover from.

References

Alcock, A. (1994) *Understanding Ulster*. Armagh, UK: Ulster Society Publications Ltd. 2001.

Collier, P. & Hoeffler, A. (2001) "Greed and grievance in civil war", *Policy Research Working Paper 2355*, World Bank, Washington, DC.

Dingley, J. (2001) "The bombing of Omagh, 15 August 1998: the bombers, their tactics, strategy, and purpose behind the incident", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 24: 451–465.

Hayes, B. & McAllister, I. (2001) "Sowing dragon's teeth: public support for political violence and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland", *Political Studies*, 49: 901–922.

Kelley, K. (1988) *The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the I.R.A*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

McGarry, J. (2001) "Lessons from Europe", in John McGarry (ed.) *Northern Ireland and the Divided World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.