

Operation Banner

Operation Banner was the operational name for the British armed forces' operation in Northern Ireland between August 1969 and July 2007, initially at the request of the Unionist government of Northern Ireland in support of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) (1972–2001), and later to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (2001–2007). Its role was to engage in counter-terrorism and public order operations in response to the Troubles, and to assist the Government in its objective of restoring normality in Northern Ireland.

An internal British Army document released in 2007 stated that whilst the Army had failed to defeat the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), it had made it impossible for them to win through the use of violence.^{[1] [2]}

Role of the armed forces

The support to the police forces was primarily from the Army, with the Royal Air Force providing helicopter support as required. A maritime component was supplied under the auspices of the Granada Patrol, by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines under the Operational Control of Senior Naval Officer Northern Ireland (SNOI) in direct support of the Army commitment. This was tasked with interdicting the supply of weapons and munitions to both sides of the sectarian divide, acting as a visible deterrence by maintaining a conspicuous maritime presence on and around the coast of Northern Ireland.

The role of the armed forces in their support role to the police was defined by the Army in the following terms:

- Routine support — Includes such tasks as providing protection to the police in carrying out normal policing duties in areas of terrorist threat; patrolling around military and police bases to deter terrorist attack and supporting police-directed counter terrorist operations.
- Additional support — Assistance where the police have insufficient assets of their own; this includes the provision of observation posts along the border and increased support during times of civil disorder. The military can provide soldiers to protect and, if necessary, supplement police lines and cordons. The military can provide heavy plant to remove barricades and construct barriers, and additional armoured vehicles and helicopters to help in the movement of police and soldiers.
- Specialist support — Includes bomb disposal, search and tracker dogs, and divers from the Royal Engineers.

Number of troops deployed

At the peak of the operation, the Army deployed some 21,000 soldiers. By 1980, the figure had dropped to 11,000, with a lower presence of 9,000 men in 1985. The total climbed to 10,500 after the intensification of the IRA use of mortars by the end of the 1980s. In 1992, there were 17,750 members of all military forces taking part of the operation. The army build-up comprised three brigades under the command of a lieutenant-general. There were six resident battalions deployed for a period of two-and-a-half years and four roulement battalions serving on six-months tours.^[3]

Equipment

Armoured Vehicles:

- Snatch Land Rover
- Ferret armoured car
- Humber Pig
- Saracen APC
- Saxon APC
- Centurion AVRE (during Operation Motorman)
- Saladin armoured car

Aircraft

- Boeing Chinook
- Westland Sea King
- Aérospatiale Gazelle
- Westland Lynx
- Aérospatiale SA 330 Puma
- Westland Scout
- Bell H-13 Sioux
- Westland Wessex
- Britten-Norman Defender
- de Havilland Canada DHC-2 Beaver

Ships

- HMS *Bildeston*
- HMS *Cygnat*
- HMS *Kingfisher*

- HMS *Fearless* (during Operation Motorman)



A British Army Land Rover patrolling South Belfast (1981)



A British Army Ammunition Technical Officer approaches a suspect device in Northern Ireland.

Reception by the Catholic community

The Army presence in Northern Ireland was initially welcomed as a neutral force by the Catholic population, who had been under attack by loyalists and the RUC but this primarily changed following a three-day military clamp down (the Falls Curfew) on the Falls area of west Belfast in July 1970.^{[4] [5] [6] [7]} The journalist Fintan O'Toole argues that "both militarily and ideologically, the army was a player, not a referee".^[8]

On 9th Aug 1971 the Unionist government of Northern Ireland introduced internment without trial (Operation Demetrius). Hundreds of Catholics were 'lifted' in pre-dawn raids. The operation was directed only at the IRA and no Loyalists were arrested. During the 3 days of violence and riots that followed, 22 people died and 7,000 Catholics were burned out of their homes.^{[9] [10]}

However, the real turning point in the relationship between the British Army and the Catholic community was 30 January 1972, more commonly known as Bloody Sunday, when British paratroopers killed 13 civil rights protesters in Derry. The deceased, along with 15 injured, and thousands of others, were taking part in an anti-internment march, when the paratroopers opened fire. The Widgery Tribunal carried out after the murders was a whitewash, and was scrapped in 2010 after the release of the Saville Inquiry. British Prime Minister David Cameron described the slaughter of the civilians as *What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable, it was wrong*. It is widely acknowledged that Bloody Sunday was the beginning of The Troubles as we know it, and was the

biggest recruitment drive that the Provisional IRA ever had.

Casualties

During the 38 year operation, 763 members of the British Armed Forces were killed and 6,100 wounded.^[11] It was announced in July 2009 that their next of kin will be eligible to receive the Elizabeth Cross.^[12]

According to the "Sutton Index of Deaths"^[13] on CAIN, the British Army killed at least 305 people during Operation Banner.

- 156 (~51%) were civilians
- 127 (~41%) were members of republican paramilitaries, including:
 - 110 members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army
 - 11 members of the Official Irish Republican Army
 - 5 members of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA)
 - 1 member of the Irish People's Liberation Organisation (IPLO)
- 13 (~4%) were members of loyalist paramilitaries, including:
 - 7 members of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA)
 - 6 members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)
- 2 were Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers

End

In August 2005, it was announced that due to the security situation improving and in accordance with the Good Friday Agreement provisions, Operation Banner would end by 1 August 2007.^[14] This involved troop numbers being reduced to 5,000, and only for training purposes. Security was entirely transferred to the police.^[15] The Northern Ireland Resident battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment—which grew out of the Ulster Defence Regiment—were stood down on 1 September 2006. The operation officially ended at midnight on 31 July 2007, making it the longest continuous deployment in the British Army's history, lasting over thirty-eight years.^[2] In the words of BBC correspondent Kevin Connolly, the British Army in Northern Ireland "melted away, rather than marched away".^[16]



Crossmaglen RUC Barracks, a joint RUC/British Army base built during the operation and demolished in 2007.

Adam Ingram, the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, has stated that assuming the maintenance of an enabling environment, British Army support to the PSNI after 31 July 2007 was reduced to a residual level, known as Operation Helvetic, providing specialised ordnance disposal and support to the PSNI in circumstances of extreme public order as described in Patten recommendations 59 and 66, should this be needed,^[17] ^[18] thus ending the British Army's emergency operation in Northern Ireland.

Analysis of the operation

In July 2007, under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 the Ministry of Defence published *Operation Banner: An analysis of military operations in Northern Ireland*, which reflected on the Army's role in the conflict and the strategic and operational lessons drawn from their involvement.^[1] ^[2] The paper divides the IRA activity and tactics in two main periods: The "insurgency" phase (1971–1972), and the "terrorist" phase (1972–1997).^[19] The British Army claims to have curbed the IRA insurgency by 1972, after Operation Motorman. The IRA then reemerged as a cell-structured organisation.^[19] The report also asserts that the government efforts by the 1980s were aimed to destroy the IRA, rather than negotiate a political solution.^[20]

The report analyses Israeli military theorist Martin van Creveld's comments on the outcome of the operation:

“Martin van Creveld has said that the British Army is unique in Northern Ireland in its success against an irregular force. It should be recognised that the Army did not 'win' in any recognisable way; rather it achieved its desired end-state, which allowed a political process to be established without unacceptable levels of intimidation. Security force operations suppressed the level of violence to a level which the population could live with, and with which the RUC and later the PSNI could cope. The violence was reduced to an extent which made it clear to the PIRA that they would not win through violence. This is a major achievement, and one with which the security forces from all three Services, with the Army in the lead, should be entirely satisfied. It took a long time but, as van Creveld [sic] said, that success is unique.”^[2]

The US military have sought to incorporate lessons from Operation Banner in their field manual.^[21]

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- [5] *Freedom or Security: The Consequences for Democracies Using Emergency Powers to Fight Terrorism* by Michael Freeman (ISBN 978-0275979133), page 53
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- [19] *Operation Banner*, Chapter I, page 3
- [20] *Operation Banner*, Chapter II, page 15: "The British Government's main military objective in the 1980s was the destruction of PIRA, rather than resolving the conflict."

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External links

- BBC News story about the ending of Operation Banner (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/northern_ireland/6921702.stm)
- BBC News, Operation Banner pictures (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/in_pictures/6921955.stm)
- Operation Banner: An analysis of military operations in Northern Ireland. Prepared under the direction of the Chief of the General Staff, [[Ministry of Defence (United Kingdom)|Ministry of Defence (<http://www.patfinucanecentre.org/misc/opbanner.pdf>)] July 2006]
- www.OperationBanner.com (<http://www.operationbanner.com>) Site with Roll of Honour, news and forums on Operation Banner
- Reeling in the Years - 1971: Raidió Teilifís Éireann (<http://www.rte.ie/tv/reelingintheyears/1971.html>)

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