The Peoples' War: Three Oral Histories of the British Army in Northern Ireland

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In the late 1960s violence broke out on the city streets of Northern Ireland – a reaction to politically charged and religiously influenced tensions that had been building in the country for centuries. This paper, based on research of the popular history and supplemented by interviews conducted with veterans who served during "the Troubles," explores the more personal side of the conflict. It discusses both the soldiers' experiences as well as how the presence of the British Army affected the lives of the local Irish for both better and worse. Through the interviews, first-hand accounts serve to explain how a modern country with a reputation for joviality and amity spent decades in a civil war — a civil war that would determine Ireland's standing as a country. Above all, this paper strives to understand how the cultural, political, and religious natures of Northern Ireland affected and continue to influence the people today.

The political and religious nature of Northern Ireland has a long and complicated history spanning centuries and remains an on-going issue. The outbreak of "the Troubles" in the late 1960s was a violent and dramatic segment of that history which caught the attention of the world. This relationship between society and religious orientation within the Christian faith has had a way of creating irreparable rifts among the population. However, despite this internal strife, the Irish people have also garnered a reputation for being welcoming hosts eager to share "a story and a pint" with anyone willing to listen. This contrast fostered feelings of frustration, confusion, and stress for the soldiers serving in the British Army during the height of the Troubles in the 1970s and 1980s.

These experiences will be explored via three interviews with men who served, in various positions, with the British Army in Northern Ireland. I met these men through a seminar class at the University of Victoria in the spring of 2016; the object of this course was to provide students with the opportunity to play an active role in the collection and preservation of military history. The first man I met with, Lieutenant-Colonel Don Stedeford, comes from a long heritage of Scottish soldiers. In Ireland he served as a private with the 33 Independent Field Squadron of the Royal Engineers and with the Intelligence Corps – when I met him, he was just weeks away from retirement. Colonel Peter Green was an English doctor who joined the

army as a student and served in both the British and Canadian Armies before retiring. He served during the early stages of the Troubles as a captain with the 7th Armoured Division, and was also his battalion's doctor. Finally, I met Major Richard Eaton, the only one of the three who was born a Canadian. He joined the British Army early in his career and served during the last years of the Troubles in an officer-level position with the 1 Parachute Regiment, before returning to Canada- where he now serves in the Canadian Army. In these interviews, there are overarching themes that were repeatedly expressed by each of these men, regardless of their varied backgrounds and the times during which they served. Going beyond the popular histories written about this conflict (which often focus on the political and religious aspects) these interviews help to shed light on teamwork among the British soldiers, interaction with the Irish people, and above all, how in this conflict there was no clear enemy, and therefore no straightforward solution. Yet from these interviews it is clear that the soldiers who served in Northern Ireland left knowing they were successfully able to reduce their military's involvement, allowing the Irish to find their own solutions.

  Going into these interviews I realized I had a bias that would not be easily overcome: the entirety of my family heritage is Irish and I have grown up learning how the British in Northern Ireland were supposedly "the enemy." However, I have never garnered any ill-will towards the British; knowing that all three of these veterans also served in the Canadian Army[1] helped me to build an understanding with them. Yet in a conflict like this, driven by terrorist action on one side and politically motivated intervention on the other, it was crucial for me to put aside feelings of unease and thus focus on the individual experiences these men had. These interviews use the popular history of politics and religion as a backdrop in order to expose the conflict in Northern Ireland as one of a far more personal nature.

  Meeting Don Stedeford, the first on my list of interviewees, came with a lot of "firsts:" with him living in Nanaimo, and my being without a car, it was the first time I got to take a Greyhound bus anywhere on Vancouver Island. Stedeford lives in a beautiful home overlooking the water, and from the squishy couches of his living room

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[1] After their service in the British Army, both Green and Stedeford transferred to the Canadian Army, where they remained until retirement. Eaton was born in Canada and started his military career with the British before joining the Canadian Army (where he remains part-time).

I asked and he answered the questions of the first interview either of us had ever done. His Scottish accent has softened during his years in Canada, but there is still enough of a lilt to lend a certain charm to the things he had to say about the Troubles. A few days later I met Peter Green, not at his home (as was the plan) but rather while walking down the road to his house, making sure I would find the right place. Looking quite like Mr. Rogers in his red sweater, Green pulled no punches – he painted a frank picture of the best and worst parts of his experiences as the battalion doctor in Belfast during the early years of the conflict. When all avenues of discussion had been exhausted and the recorder turned off, Green walked me through his collection of photos from Northern Ireland and even gave me some – plus a few homemade cookies – as a parting gift. Then on a brilliantly sunny March afternoon I met the third of my interviewees, Major Richard Eaton, eleven storeys above downtown Victoria in the office of his consulting business. Eaton is the youngest of the men I talked to and as such served in Northern Ireland towards the tail end of the conflict; still involved in the Canadian military, he spoke with the straightforwardness and clarity one might expect from a soldier. With a rather sharp wit, Eaton talked at length about the situation he experienced in Northern Ireland regarding the kinds of people he interacted with, civilian or otherwise. Above all else he was proud of what they were able to accomplish during that time and, most importantly, he was proud of the people behind those accomplishments.

Once the interviews had been completed, there was the task of summing up the main topics of discussion, time-stamping everything, and making sure the recordings themselves were clear and understandable. With everything in place, it was time to hand all of it over to the University so that it could be added to the Archive's online database. The content of the interviews, and the men who shared their experiences, provide a focused and unique interpretation of a conflict that spanned decades and was driven by the complexities of a modern nation. They did not offer solutions to any of the problems presented, but did explore how those problems were manifested, and how they continue to be influential today.

The Troubles officially began in August of 1969 when tensions that had been building in the province of Ulster[2] broke out on the

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[2] Six counties out of nine now composing the region of Northern Ireland.

streets of Londonderry (known as Free Derry to Catholics)[3] and Belfast. Catholic factions of the population that had felt supressed by the British government rebelled violently within the predominantly Protestant neighbourhoods of these cities, causing an immediate and equally violent reaction – over the course of a single night the province had devolved into chaos.[4] When the dust settled in the morning the situation was dire; British troops immediately flooded both cities, and would remain there as a buffer between the Protestants and the Catholics for the next twenty-seven years.[5]

Ireland, along with the rest of the British Isles, converted to Catholicism sometime in the 4th-5th century. This religion quickly became an important part of Gaelic culture. Since the English and the Irish retained their own distinct social and political structures, Catholicism was the only similarity shared by the two islands for centuries.[6] However, later development of the Anglican Church and English colonization of Ireland caused rifts amongst the Irish.[7] What developed over the following centuries were social, political, and religious differences so intense that the British-loyal north and the Irish independent south cut themselves off from each other in the early 20th century, to bring some kind of relief to the civil strife. In 1924 a border was officially laid, creating Northern Ireland as a province of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland as an independent state in the south.[8] The new Republic retained its traditional Catholicism while in the north the majority adhered to Protestantism. Despite this division, minority populations continued to exist on both sides, and it was among radical Catholics in the north where the first signs of aggression broke out.[9]

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[3] The two names are both recognized by the city in order to ease tension still felt between the Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods. Using the "wrong" name or listing them in the "wrong" order can still incite anger some among the local populace.

[4] Charles Allen, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Soldiers' Voices 1945-1989* (London: Futura Publications, 1991), 205.

[5] Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1985), 33.

[6] S.J. Connolly, *Contested Island: Ireland 1460-1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17.

[7] Bob Rowthorn and Naomi Wayne, *Northern Ireland: The Political Economy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 17-18.

[8] Dewar, *British Army*, 17.

[9] Roger H. Hull, *The Irish Triangle: Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Princeton:

When the British Army first arrived in Northern Ireland, Catholics welcomed them warmly, viewing them as saviours who would defend them against the Protestants.[10] But it was not long before these sentiments changed, as the Army came to be viewed as a force for the *status quo*: it quickly became the opinion of both sides of the divide that if the British Army was not actively against their enemy, they were with the enemy.[11] Indeed, this added to the frustrations of the British Army, for there was no significant difference between an Irish Catholic and an Irish Protestant beyond their personal faith. The British Army thought the difference of religion alone was not a rational motivating factor for the kind of civil terrorism they were there to prevent.[12]

When Peter Green first arrived in Belfast in the autumn of 1971 as a captain in the Medical Corps he witnessed firsthand just how quickly local attitudes could turn against the British. At this point the 7th Armoured Division had already served one tour in Belfast and had enjoyed the hospitality of the locals; but in the brief time between their tours the situation had changed so much that the reactions they received upon their return caused a shock, taking almost a month to recover from.[13] This was not unique to the 7th Armoured Division: in the popular histories mention is usually made of the initially kind reception, such as being brought tea and cookies by the ladies. The shock was that this had such an abrupt end, rendering British soldiers pariahs virtually overnight.[14] News about day-to-day developments in Northern Ireland was sparse in these early days of the conflict. Inevitably, there were headlines on television and the radio about the most important, eye-catching topics, but these kinds of reports did not prepare soldiers for the reactions they would receive from the populace.[15] The level of importance the Irish placed on the religious aspect of the conflict scarcely entered British media and was of little concern to the Army; a terrorist was a terrorist regardless of his faith.[16]

Princeton University Press, 1976), 41.

[10] Allen, *Savage Wars*, 205.

[11] Hull, *Irish Triangle*, 58.

[12] Major Richard Eaton, interviewed by Kate Riordon, March 8 2016, Victoria, 10:00.

[13] Colonel Peter Green, interviewed by Kate Riordon, February 25 2016, Cordova Bay, 8:03.

[14] Allen, *Savage Wars*, 209-210.

[15] Allen, *Savage Wars*, 213.

[16] Lieutenant-Colonel Don Stedeford, interviewed by Kate Riordon, February

As such, since cultural awareness was absent from British preparations, and since soldiers encountered hostility where they had previously been welcomed, it made a harsh impression on them. Green commented at one point: generals can only prepare for the previous war, just as these battalions could only prepare for their previous experience.[17] These soldiers were not prepared for the hostile reception they received.

In early 1972 the government declared a policy of internment without cause, giving the military free reign to arrest and detain anyone that they deemed to be a threat to the safety of the civilians. This was (quite understandably) not well-received by the locals as very few of them were ever actually involved with terrorist cells. Young men were typically the ones targeted by soldiers; in the wake of internment anyone walking the streets could be subjected to a random search.[18] Groups like the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) were a huge cause for concern as they favoured things like high-powered explosives and shootings in cities, where they could cause maximum effect. It was the goal of groups like this to cause so much unrest that the government in London would view the situation as a lost cause, pull their troops out, and leave the Irish to establish their own governmental systems. Of course, by this time Britain was already very heavily involved in the situation and was not going to simply abandon the civilians of Northern Ireland.[19] In an attempt to get ahead of the situation, the British Intelligence Corps began gathering information on all potential aggressors as a preventative measure against further violence. The priority, as the British government saw it, was to prevent those they saw as their own citizens from causing further harm.[20]

While on his third tour in the area of South Armagh with the 1st Parachute Regiment in 1988, Richard Eaton came into very close contact with some of the most violent terrorist cells. Having been largely forced out of the cities and into the countryside, these groups made it their mission to eliminate the local police force, and when the army prevented this, the terrorists would attack soldiers. The best thing that the British Army could do for Irish civilians by that time was to help bring about independent stability by re-establishing local police

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20 2016, Nanaimo BC, 5:25 (3REC).

[17] Colonel Green, 10:00.

[18] Ibid., 17:30.

[19] Hull, *The Irish Triangle*, 58.

[20] Rowthorn and Wayne, *Northern Ireland*, 53.

strength to the point where the soldiers were no longer needed.[21] The aim of the British government was to move the issues in Northern Ireland away from the military and into the political realm. Around this same time many nationalist groups in the cities came together in organized political parties that could stand in a position to deal directly with London. Leaders in both Ireland and Britain were beginning to realize that a military victory was not achievable, and negotiations began.[22] This was all well and good for the future of the country, but until that time, the men on the ground would face far more serious challenges.

Of course, existing alongside the violent factions of the population was everyone else: Irish civilians who wanted nothing more than to live their daily lives in peace. From the outset of British involvement in Northern Ireland the primary and overarching objective was to make sure that they would be able to do just that.[23] Within that capacity, the British Army sent in specialists in various capacities that would be able to work far more closely with locals than the soldiers in uniform could. Don Stedeford was able to interact with the people of Lisburn[24] while serving tours both as part of a uniformed group and with the Intelligence Corps. During his first tour with the 33 Independent Field Squadron, of the Royal Engineers, he talked a lot about being able to go out on the "local economy:" visiting bars to find the best Guinness and playing soccer.[25] Although the soldiers were able to hold amicable relations with the people around them – of course, always dependent on the official threat level in the area – there were precautions that had to be taken into consideration:

> You had to be very careful about what kind of bar you went to… The whole Troubles was based on sectarian issues and race, or rac*ism*, so you would not go to some bars where they were either staunchly

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[21] Major Richard Eaton, 15:55.

[22] Jim Smyth, "Dropping Slow: The Emergence of the Irish Peace Process," in *Political Violence in Northern Ireland: Conflict and Conflict Resolution*, ed. Alan O'Day (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 76.

[23] Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 129.

[24] Southwest of Belfast.

[25] Lieutenant-Colonel Don Stedeford, 25:25.

> Catholic or staunchly Protestant and where you'd get in trouble in a heartbeat.[26]

This continues to hold true for Ireland even today; while it may not illicit the same kind of reactions from the "offended" party, failure to acknowledge the religion of a certain area can result in an extreme amount of discomfort for any foreigner.

In his work with the Royal Engineers, Stedeford came into contact with the more aggressive side of the population as much as the peaceful one. One of his responsibilities involved the construction of "site screens," a corrugated metal defense around military bases. These screens had to be constructed on site, which meant building it up above street level to the point where the soldiers putting them up could become the target of enemy snipers. While there were patrol teams in the blocks around where the screens were going up, providing cover to the soldiers, there was always the potential for danger. Soldiers would erect the skeleton and then rivet the metal sheeting into place:

> And you'd think, 'Did I drill that hole? I didn't drill that hole.' Because all you hear is *ting* as the hole appears and then you hear the weapon report, if you hear it at all, later. And you'd realize somebody's actually, you know, having a go at you. So you wanna do those things as quick as you can.[27]

All of the men that I spoke to had stories about times when they came under fire, and while narratives along this stream are not hard to find in the popular histories, what is more often than not left out is the feeling of *safety* within a team. Both Eaton and Green deployed to Northern Ireland as part of an established battalion that trained together beforehand; Stedeford deployed as an individual and was placed with a battalion once there. What is important to remember when looking at a conflict like the one in Northern Ireland is that there was no clear indication of who the enemy was; in fact, the entire concept of "the enemy" was fluid and subject to rapid change. One faction wanted a unified and totally independent Ireland, another wanted a unified Ireland that existed as part of the United Kingdom, and the British Army wanted to keep everyone from tearing each other

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[26] Ibid., 5:19.
[27] Ibid., 15:59 (2REC).

to pieces.[28] Within a conflict so divided it was crucial for the British soldiers to work together as a cohesive and solid team.

Green talked fondly about his battalion, the 1st Battalion Green Howards, and how they were a quintessential British force: a group with tradition. The men who served in this battalion all came from the same part of southern England, so they all had the same accents and had gone through years of training together. Like so many other well-trained armies, service in demanding and stressful situations built trust and made them an effective force.[29] Through Green's position as the battalion's doctor he had a bit more contact with other companies, and shows that his idea of the Green Howards proved applicable to most other British regiments.[30]

Eaton served in theatre at an officer level and often spoke of the importance of leading his company by example; inspiring the men around him to be the most effective soldiers they could be. He commented that this was a huge responsibility, but it brought immense satisfaction when the hard work put into a plan paid off.[31] He stressed the importance of breaking habits, especially while on patrol, so as to remain an unpredictable target for their opponents. He even joked about his men's reactions:

> As an Officer it was my job to break up peoples' habits. I used to call it Screw People Around, which [ticked] them off; they would come in after a patrol and I'd go, "No, no, you're going out again for 20 minutes, go back out.' [Which would be met with grumbles.] 'I don't care! Get out.' Because that would break up our habits and our routines and throw the terrorists off. [The terrorists'] aim was not to die a hero, it was to be effective and get away.[32]

Green had a similar method of dealing with habits, but in a way that came off as a kind of "sixth sense" to his men. The patrols that he would do around Belfast were in armoured ambulances with armed rovers for protection; the front seat beside the driver was the one typically occupied by an officer and would therefore often be the target of attacks, so no one wanted to sit there. Green would sit in the back with the others. However, after a while he would tell the driver to take

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[28] Hull, *Irish Triangle*, 70.
[29] Colonel Green, 41:38.
[30] Ibid., 43:35.
[31] Major Eaton, 27:45.
[32] Major Eaton, 23:14.

them down a different route, because he no longer felt comfortable stopping at a particular stop sign or going through a particular intersection. So they would take new routes for their patrols, and usually within the next couple days there would be a report about how another patrol was attacked while stopped at that same stop sign or intersection.[33]

Considering that there was about ten to fifteen years' difference between when Green and Eaton served, it stands as a prime example of how well the British Army was able to adapt to the situation and make sure that further along in the conflict their men were as well-prepared as possible. What may have started as intuition in the 1970s became standard procedure, as per Eaton, a decade later. Even though the Northern Ireland conflict is commonly referred to as a political struggle between Parliament in London and the nationalist groups in Northern Ireland, the reality was that this was a guerrilla war waged on the streets of a modern country.

The Troubles stemmed in part from Ireland's relationship with Britain; the latter was not able to comprehend this conflict politically because they did not completely understand the former's mentality regarding national identity. Ireland had been subject to the colonial process exercised elsewhere in the British Empire but, as Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd explain,

> Irish differences always appeared – to the British at least – less inevitable and more reconcilable than those of the other colonies… [the line of thought was] Irish instability would run its course and the greater part of the island would secede. But, in hindsight, Irish secession appears less inevitable than that of the rest of the empire.[34]

As the three veterans I interviewed often commented, there really was not much difference between the Irish and the rest of Great Britain other than how the Irish viewed their situation. In such a modern world, one where the British Empire is diminished, it makes sense that some Irish would also want total independence, while the British would fight to protect people they saw as part of Great Britain from violent radicals.

Everyone involved in the Troubles had their own reasons for being there: be it nationalism, colonialism, protection, or otherwise.

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[33] Colonel Green, 35:00.

[34] Ruane and Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 213.

One thing that Stedeford pointed out was that in Northern Ireland, Britain was not the only major influence. America has had long historical ties with Ireland and in the 1970s the issues across the Atlantic looked a lot like those they had seen in Vietnam. Stedeford commented that from a British standpoint, it looked like the Americans thought what was going on in Northern Ireland was a revolution; the downtrodden people were going to throw off their oppressor's yoke. This manifested itself in huge amounts of funding being provided to groups like PIRA, only serving to make the situation worse by adding more explosives, more guns, and more casualties.[35] And yet despite the rampant danger, people were largely able to go about their normal lives. By the time Eaton served in the late 1980s the situation had reached a whole new level of abnormality:

> I was astonished at the extent to which most people didn't really know what was going on. I remember stopping and searching some cars and [this guy] said, 'What's the Army doing here?' And we were like, 'uh, you heard about the Troubles?' [laughs] It was amazing; to the extent that our operations were going on, we didn't have much impact on peoples' regular lives, which was great.[36]

The ultimate goal was to be able to leave Northern Ireland in a situation where it would be able to take care of itself. By the early 1990s much of the actual fighting had stopped, though there were still army patrols around the country to help keep a lid on the lingering militant groups. However, much of the conflict had moved into the political sphere: outspoken Irish nationalist figures had joined established political parties and talks began with London about putting the situation to rest. For many who had served in the army this was fantastic: the action was moving away from military involvement. The Troubles had been going on for so long they had created a reality where something horrible like a bomb going off in London could be traced back to Ireland, and that was not how the Irish people wanted to be seen by the world.[37]

The Irish and the British had reached a place where neither side could advance their cause any further. They were tired of the constant threat of violence and the presence of British soldiers on Irish

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[35] Lieutenant-Colonel Stedeford, 1:04 (3REC).
[36] Major Eaton, 39:14.
[37] Ibid., 40:05.

streets. As with all compromise, no one was able to walk away from the 1992-94 peace discussions with the specific results that they wanted, but they were able to end the worst of it and begin working on ways to peacefully coexist.[38]

It was interesting to hear the opinions of these three men on the situation in Northern Ireland since the Downing Street Documents of 1994. As per Don Stedeford:

> You've got quite a bit of tourism there now… using the Troubles as a backdrop. 'Come and see the Shankill and the Fall's Road and look at all the paintings on the walls and things.' That's just a reminder to me of, I think, the worst in people.[39]

Stedeford is not of the opinion that the Troubles are being remembered in the most appropriate way; instead of using them as a cautionary tale, they are being glorified, used to draw tourists into the country. Peter Green is of a similar mind, alluding to the idea that the way in which the Troubles are being remembered is preventing Ireland from finding a more inclusive solution to their cultural differences.[40]

For my own part, having been to Belfast and Londonderry, and having seen the paintings and the walls and noticing the political atmosphere that still permeates the country, I can understand why these men feel this way. Ireland is a beautiful country filled with people who are genuinely happy to talk to foreigners and share their stories ("Most Irishmen are instant historians"[41]), but there is always a tension just below the surface.

When remembering the events and the issues involved in the Troubles it is important to always bear in mind that this was a multi-faceted conflict that involved so much more than just the British Army and Irish terrorists. The accounts of these veterans show a far more well-rounded view of what it was like in the streets of Northern Ireland than many popular histories that focus on just the political aspect or singular events that survive in collective memory. They show that this conflict is not one that is easily understood. Interviews and popular histories together prove that there were far more important aspects of

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[38] Paul Bew, "Making Peace Work," in *Political Violence in Northern Ireland: Conflict and Conflict Resolution*, ed. Alan O'Day (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 98-99.

[39] Lieutenant-Colonel Stedeford, 8:21 (3REC).

[40] Colonel Green, 56:44.

[41] Dewar, *British Army*, 11.

the conflict than just the actions of terrorists and the reactions of respective governments.

The British Army was able to go into a situation where the sentiments of the people they were protecting could change in an afternoon, and while it may have been difficult for individuals to cope with initially, it made the British Army an extremely effective fighting force. With a reduced likelihood of finding sympathy among the civilian population around them, British soldiers had to depend on each other more than ever. The lack of a clearly defined opponent which did not operate by the conventional rules of war, created the need for a far more individualized approach to warfare. These British soldiers were able to leave Northern Ireland in a place where military intervention was no longer required by not allowing themselves to get tangled up in religious and political conflict.

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