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Commentary

Northern Ireland Offers Hope for Conflict Resolution

by Kevin Cullen

Weekend Edition Sunday, August 5, 2007 · If we can take anything from last week, when the British Army mission in Northern Ireland ended after 38 years with hardly anyone noticing, it's that war is loud and peace is — well, quiet.

There was none of the pomp and circumstance that the Brits do so well. No pipes. No flag lowering. No parades. And that's good, because there are already too many parades in the north of Ireland.

The British squaddies arrived in 1969, in something the generals called Operation Banner, and the British envisioned it in their earnest-if-patronizing way as simply an exercise in separating the incorrigibly belligerent Irish during a civil war known as "the Troubles."

But the Irish know their history too well, and the British don't know it well enough. What was supposed to be a brief peacekeeping mission became the longest British military deployment ever.

When squaddies first walked into the Bogside in Derry, they were greeted on doorsteps by Catholic housewives with cups of tea.

But soldiers, any soldiers anywhere, are not welcome for long. Even squaddies with the best intentions could not win, because there is no such thing as an impartial British soldier on the island of Ireland.

Within months, squaddies who at first kept marauding Protestant loyalists from burning out their Catholic neighbors were dodging bullets from an Irish Republican Army that was given a new lease on life by the very presence of what they saw as an occupying army.

The same soldiers who sipped tea were soon kicking in the same doors and cursing the same women who made the tea, looking for IRA weapons that may or may not have been there.

Like all armies, the British army saw collaborators everywhere, so all Catholics were seen as IRA supporters.

Over the years, I met dozens of men who joined the IRA because a British soldier harassed or humiliated them or their families.

Thirty-six years ago this week, the army rounded up hundreds of Catholic men and teenagers, few of whom were actually in the IRA. Far from smashing the IRA, the army's overzealous policy of internment without trial infuriated the entire nationalist community.

And in 1972, when British paratroopers killed 14 unarmed demonstrators in Derry on Bloody Sunday, the IRA was flooded with recruits. Half of the more than 3,500 people killed in the Troubles died in the fury of the five years that followed Bloody Sunday.

Of course, there were acts of incredible heroism by British soldiers. Their bomb disposal units saved hundreds of lives. They did keep people from killing each other. And when I met young squaddies from Manchester or Newcastle or Sheffield on patrol, they often looked like clueless, scared kids, not evil men

bent on avenging ancient grievances.

At the peak of the Troubles, there were 27,000 soldiers in Northern Ireland. Today, there are 5,000, and now they are more likely to be deployed from their garrison to Basra than to Belfast, to the rugged mountains of Afghanistan than to the soft, green hills of Armagh.

As the U.S. and British militaries try to calm a restive populace in both Iraq and Afghanistan, you could say Northern Ireland offers hope — that a conflict once thought of as intractable can be resolved.

But we can't ask too much of soldiers.

By the time the tea gets cold, it's usually time to go.

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