

Huge policing op

Preparing for the annual Drumcree parade at Portadown has become an all-year-round task for the soldiers of 3rd Infantry Brigade

**Reports: Ray Routledge
Pictures: Army Information Service,
Northern Ireland and Ray Routledge**

THE much-anticipated and publicised confrontation at Drumcree in Portadown failed to materialise in the face of a massive Royal Ulster Constabulary and Army presence.

When the Parades Commission outlawed the Orange Order march down the nationalist Garvaghy Road a week before the annual Drumcree parade, long-term plans by the Army to support the RUC, left marchers and troublemakers in no doubt of upholding the law were put into action.

Police have maintained a close watch on the road since the violence of 1998 when the Orange Order marchers were prevented from entering the Nationalist area of Portadown. Many lessons were learned from that confrontation.

The giant barrier which proved so effective last year was improved and reinforced and, combined with reinforcements of troops to support the RUC, left marchers and troublemakers in no doubt that the Security Forces meant business.

Hosting the Army's input at Portadown was the 3rd (County Down and County Armagh) Battalion. The Royal Irish Regiment, its base, Mahon Barracks, was the scene of frantic activity as the 3rd Infantry Brigade brought in reinforcements which included the 1st Battalion, Scots Guards;

1st Battalion, Grenadier Guards; 1st Battalion, The Cheshire Regiment; 1st Battalion, The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders; 1st Battalion, The King's Regiment; The Royal Dragoon Guards; 5 Regiment, Army Air Corps; 21 Logistic Support Regiment, RLC; and 33 Field Squadron, 25 Engineer Regiment.

They were backed up by a variety of units and sub-units, including 15 Signal Regiment.

Lt Col Angus Loudon, CO 3 R Irish, told *Soldier* the parade route was altered in 1986 because the area had become more nationalist and so potentially more dangerous to the marchers. But the real problems did not start until ten years later.

PERMANENT PRESENCE

"The present difficulties started in 1996 when there were protests about the route," he said. "Since last year's march was banned, there has been a permanent presence by the Orange Order on the hill near Drumcree Church and they have held numerous small parades up to the church."

"Public order is very much a police responsibility and in general terms they can cope with most things that come their way. But in some cases they do not have the numbers or the equipment with which to deal with these events satisfactorily.



Tactical analysis: Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders discuss the Drumcree march route

They come to the Army looking for public order-trained troops or specialist equipment support such as engineering and vehicles.

"Our job is to support the RUC in their role of implementing the decision of the Parades Commission."

Capt Graham Dunlop, the 3 R Irish operations officer, experienced the 1998 Drumcree march at first hand. He explained that the Security Forces had learned a lot from that confrontation.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

"Although this is a brigade operation, they still rely on us for continuity and local knowledge, as do the other battalions who come in," he said. "I am lucky with my staff, for some of whom this is their fifth Drumcree. They help me a lot."

As well as the reinforcing Army units, Mahon Barracks is a permanent headquarters for the RUC's southern region, and played host to an equivalent number of RUC reinforcements. All of which put much extra work on the quartermaster and his staff.

"For 3 R Irish, Drumcree has now become a year-round military operation," said WO2 (RQMS(T)) David Turner.



Tent city: Temporary accommodation for reinforcements drafted into Mahon Barracks

Operation pays off



Watching their backs: Two Scots Guardsmen during the Drumcree parade

and 800 camp beds and tables, issued about 4,000 litres of petrol and 1,000 litres of diesel a day and ordered basic but vital items of equipment such as portable toilets and 500 bales of toilet rolls.

The cookhouse also got through an extraordinary amount of food. Nearly 2,500 kilos of steaks, 2,236 kilos of pork chops, 52,000 rashers of bacon, and 36,000 sausages were ordered the weekend before Drumcree. On the Friday before the march Sgt Turner's department ordered 500 loaves of bread and 10,000 baps for packed meals. There were 240 kilos of pears, apples and bananas, and 1,000 oranges, and the temporary residents of Mahon Barracks were also getting through 9,000 eggs a day and hundreds of gallons of milk.

Meals for 2,200 people were prepared by ten chefs from 3 R Irish with a helping hand from 1 A and SH and the Royal Engineers. There was also a field kitchen.

The medical centre also braced itself for an onslaught which, thankfully, never came. Maj Tony Finn, the medical officer, could not afford to take chances and drafted in extra medical staff.

The R Irish home service battalions each have an area of responsibility and taking them away for an operation such as

Drumcree has to be avoided, hence the reinforcements.

While those at battalion headquarters were supporting operations in Portadown, other companies kept a watchful eye on potential trouble spots.

Men from B Company at Ballykilner worked out of the RUC station at Castlewellan while others from C Company were at Rathfriland RUC station and F Company were prepared for trouble spots around Lurgan.

Maj Colin Miller, OC B Coy, said: "We have been left behind to support police in G Division. It was bad here last year but just because everything is focused on Portadown, it does not mean we are not alert elsewhere."

PROFESSIONALISM

He paid tribute to the professionalism of his men. "I am a Highlander on loan and took over 18 months ago. I have a mature company of soldiers who know their own minds."

Capt Tim Rogan, acting OC of C Coy at Rathfriland, said his soldiers were charged with keeping main transit routes open as well as being alert for the ever-present, although currently diminished, terrorist threat. He was equally complimentary about his soldiers. "Our state of awareness is very high," he said.

At Lurgan, soldiers of F Company were on stand-by under Maj Neil McCullough. "Morale is very high," he said, adding with a grin: "In off-duty periods we have started up a volleyball mini-league and competition is fierce."



Vigilant: A Grenadier Guardsman patrols the streets

"The whole action is supported by 3 R Irish's QM department. We are responsible for supporting all brigade troops who come in. All the materiel for the major and minor units, such as loan stores, tents, ammunition, rations, fuel, everything that is required to support those troops, comes through us.

"We are now supporting 3,500 troops, which is quite a big operation for us."

In the build-up, Sgt Turner's small team has handled more than 100 tents