

# The first Lady of the Greenfinches

SIX YEARS AGO Lyn changed her life. From being 'just an ordinary housewife' with a five-year-old daughter, she became a soldier fighting in the front line. For Lyn was born in Belfast, and in 1973 she became the first woman member of the Ulster Defence Regiment.

"My husband was already full-time in the UDR, and I'd been a fireside critic for years," she remembers. "I could see that there were women terrorists and I had been going on to him about the need for women to be working on our side too. Then one night he came and told me that a Bill had been passed in Parliament allowing women to be recruited — the time had come for me to put my money where my mouth was! In fact, I was the first to be processed — it happened so quickly that I even had to fill in a male application form."

In the war-torn province, the UDR has now been continuously operational for a longer period than any regiment in the British Army since the Napoleonic Wars. Although it is an integral part of the British Army, its members all live at home — there are no barracks or married quarters. The backbone of the UDR is the part-time soldier — men and women from all walks of life prepared to put on uniform two or three nights a week and at weekends to help in the fight against terrorism.

'Greenfinches' — the women members — were named after their original army radio

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Story: Judith Stares

callsign. The number has now reached 800 and there is a waiting list.

"The men certainly didn't want us at first," she recalls. "They resented it very much when we joined up. I think they thought we would be a burden and a handicap. I think my husband was quite proud when I volunteered, although it was very strange at first. He did day-time duties and he was the one who stayed home at night to look after the baby while I went on patrol. It was a complete reversal of roles. Mind you, I've never managed to get out of the washing up!"

A normal working night for a Greenfinch begins about 8 o'clock when she reports to her local UDR centre. After briefing and collecting her flak jacket she can expect to be on patrol until about 3 or 4 am. "We search women and cars; do the 'scribing,' which means logging details of all vehicles and drivers at checkpoints; operate the radio and do the map-reading. We're all trained in first-aid, too." None of the Greenfinches is armed, and Lyn prefers it that way. "The terrorists know that we're not armed and we don't want to carry guns. I think if we did, the Greenfinches would be in even more danger."

As it is, they live under constant threat. All UDR members work and live in or near the areas they patrol and, once recruited, they could become targets for an IRA assassination. Already three Greenfinches and more than 90 UDR men have been killed during the last ten years of the unforgiving 'Troubles.'

The dangers at home are no less than the dangers of night patrols along the hazardous roads of Ulster's bandit country. "On patrol, when we stop to operate a vehicle checkpoint, the first thing I look for is a place for myself in case of ambush. The men mustn't feel they need to protect you — it's their job to engage the enemy and to return fire. I make sure there is some cover on either side, like a bush or a tree. You must never stay in the vehicle, because if there was an attack then the petrol tank could blow up. Two Greenfinches go on each patrol, but you mustn't stand in a huddle either. You don't let them have the opportunity to get you both. One girl is briefed to operate the radio and the other will look after any first-aid that's needed."

First-aid has become Lyn's real forte. "I've done the St John Ambulance courses and become a qualified first-aid instructor for the UDR. Two or three nights a week and at weekends I come in to take training. It can be a class of six to 20 men, but I also take the Wives Club, the Boys Brigade and the young Irish Rangers."

Lyn has risen to colour-sergeant and is now second in command of the 40 Greenfinches in her battalion. "I am ambitious, but I have to think of my home. If I had an extra rank I would be above my husband and I think he would resent it. He would feel he was not wearing the trousers! My ambition was to become an officer, but to do that might have cost me my home and my marriage."

In spite of pioneering into a man's world, she enjoys being a girl. "Most of my time is spent in uniform, but it's no use pretending that it has saved me any money. It gives me a real thrill to dress up. There are at least two functions a month connected with the



Two aspects of soldiering with the Greenfinches: (above) snapping out salutes and (below) operating the radio while out on one of the regular Ulster Defence Regiment patrols.



regiment, and I'm always there — sometimes as the only woman!"

Like her colleagues, Lyn feels that she is fighting for her family's future, and for her daughter's sake she must remain optimistic. "We all have so much in common here that I often wonder what we are fighting about. We have a small country, but it has a small population and there is room enough for everyone. There are some beautiful places, too — places which the Troubles haven't even touched. People still live and love without being affected by the Troubles. My

husband is English, and we have just bought a new home here. If we didn't think there was hope for this country we would have left long ago."

But the memory of too many deaths will never be erased from her mind. "I've been to so many military funerals. I've had to comfort both husbands and wives who have been left alone. They always say their partner didn't die in vain if it helps to put an end to the war. But ten years is too long to keep saying that. I don't want to die for my country — I want to live for it."