

# Shoring up the

Troops are back on the streets of Belfast but it does not signal a return to routine patrolling

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IT was only a trick of the early-morning light, but for a moment the streets on the Shankill looked like they were awash with sparkling water. The illusion was caused by the shattered glass of a hundred bottles, thrown the day before as loyalist factions fought each other in and around the estates.

The turf war spread like a bush fire: three people were murdered, more than 30 others burnt out of their homes and the streets seethed with bloodletting.

In the desperate hours that followed, the Royal Ulster Constabulary battled to keep control and asked for the Army's support to protect the public and maintain law and order. The effect of the resulting deployment was dramatic and immediate.

Maj Bill Wright, RGJ, officer commanding Belfast Company, 1st Battalion, The Royal Green Jackets at Girdwood Barracks, explained what happened when the opposing factions – the Ulster Freedom Fighters and the Ulster Volunteer Force – prepared to lay into one another with an assortment of weapons.

"There was a number of patrols on the ground and in close enough proximity that they deployed slap-bang between the two crowds before they got to each other. They deployed into a very loose baseline

... they literally stood, a couple of metres between each man, one lot facing the UVF and the other the UFF.

"They just stood in the middle of the road with a couple of vehicles and the effect was absolutely incredible. The crowds, which had been moving at some pace towards each other, hell-bent on giving each other a beating – if not something even more serious – just stopped.

"They stopped right on the line and there was nothing said against the troops whatsoever. There was no pushing, jostling, abuse. Then the RUC arrived and took the troops' place. It ended and the crowds dissipated.

"Things are definitely calmer than when we deployed on the streets. What we have achieved thus far is we have prevented any more mur-

ders and we have calmed the situation down markedly. The great fear was that something was going to happen but nobody knew where. The local population was very on edge and worried that they were going to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Temporarily troops may be back on Belfast streets, but this deployment signals a distinct departure from two years ago. This time round they are being used specifically to assist the RUC, wherever and whenever they are needed, and then get out again. It is not a return to routine Army patrolling.

"The guys are out checking if people are all right and very much calming the whole situation down," said Maj Wright. "The soldiers speak to people and get a feel of the ground, preventing anyone from attacking either side. It has been extremely effective so far."

Soldier joined I Company, 1 RGJ on the Shankill to see



Talk time: Rfn Lee Carson, above, with children on the Shankill Road. Maj Charles Dunphie, below, OC I Coy, on the street



how the support tactics worked on the ground.

Patrolling in Tavern armoured personnel vehicles and on foot, the soldiers worked their way along the Shankill Road and surrounding streets as shoppers went about their business.

Individuals, mostly the elderly, stopped for a brief chat and young children waved and shouted. Others' eyes were not as welcoming, although little was said.

Maj Charles Dunphie RGJ, OC I Company, believed the soldiers had been generally well-received. Working in shifts around the clock, their presence was high-profile and hard to avoid. They were



Shankill patrol: WO2 John Mabb, left, and LCpl Neil Guerin lead with Rfn Adam Chapman bringing up the rear

# Shankill



particularly alert to the threat posed by small convoys of cars, which cruised neighbourhoods, checking out who was about. The cars' occupants generally wore body armour and demeanours that suggested trouble.

The Army had helped the RUC set up snap checkpoints and carry out vehicle searches which had been effective in stopping problems before they started.

Lt Col James Plastow, commanding officer of 1 RGJ, said: "This is precisely what the Army is for over here, to support the police and the peace agreement, and to be ready to deal with problems as and when they occur.

"What I find particularly impressive is the fast and immediate response that we were able to produce. Quite a lot of the people were doing something completely different in the part of the cycle before this blew up. I Company were on gate guard at Palace Barracks on a rest period. C Company were on a training period. But within three or four hours when we realised the RUC wanted help they had



Ready to go: 1 (Sp) Coy prepare to patrol the Shankill

switched, got kitted up, and were out on the streets doing the business. The blood-letting stopped instantly.

"Really what we are providing now is strong and robust reassurance and deterrence to prevent further bloodletting to enable mediation to take place.

"I am proud of the way they have handled themselves."

Back on the Shankill, Rfn Gary Jamison summed up the view from the streets: "An old woman told me she was glad we were there. 'Now I can go and get my pension', she said."

Street sign: Rfn Lee Carson checks the progress of 1 (Support) Company before entering the Shankill Road on a patrol

● A measure of how far the security situation in Northern Ireland has changed can be gauged by the fact that three weeks after 1 RGJ, the resident battalion, first deployed on to the streets, it was released to take part in a field training exercise in the north of England and Scotland.

● This was the first time for many years that a resident battalion had been deployed on exercise away from Northern Ireland.

● While it was away the Belfast Roulement Battalion (BRB), currently formed by 40 Commando, Royal Marines, took over 1 RGJ's duties in support of the RUC in the Shankill. This change also relieved Northern Ireland-based detachments from the Royal Anglian Regiment and Royal Air Force Regiment which had been deployed in support of the Green Jackets.

● The roulement battalion moved to the mainland in April as part of GOC Northern Ireland's rear-based contingent. It remained available for routine deployment in the Province when necessary. Troop numbers in Northern Ireland stay the same at around 13,500.