

British Legion Operation Banner Service

17th August 2019 at the War Memorial

There's a phrase that keeps cropping up in the Bible. It's about beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. The writers of the Bible copied and pasted into three different places. That's because it speaks of the natural human yearning for what these days we would call the de-escalation of war and the decommissioning of arms. That was what Operation Banner was meant to be all about: trying to de-escalate the sectarian tensions that were arising between the communities in Ulster and to maintain peace on the streets of Belfast.

It turned into the longest armed conflict in British military history. The death toll is chilling: 814 from the regular British Army, 548 from the Ulster Defence Regiment, 17 from the Territorial Army, 26 from the Royal Marines, 26 from the RAF, 8 from the Royal Navy and another 47 associated with the British military. It was asymmetric warfare. That means that

the death of 20 year old Bridlington man, Ronald Michael Kitchen, whose name is inscribed on the memorial around which we gather this afternoon, who was killed by a gunman who went into a derelict building, removed a brick from the wall so that he could see a checkpoint, poked his gun through and waited until a target appear; it means that his death can be described as a cowardly murder. In addition to the deaths thousands of British troops had to endure the horrors of the Troubles and many returned with physical injuries or stress disorders that mar their lives to this day. And of course we must remember, that whatever we may think about the members of the paramilitary organisations, every time one of them was killed, their families grieved for a son or a partner or a father.

We gather here this afternoon as members and supporters of the Royal British Legion – some nursing our own memories and grief – to remember members of the British Armed Forces who served in Operation Banner: to give thanks for their dedication and

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

courage, to commemorate the lives of those who died, to console those who grieve, to stand in solidarity with those whose lives are haunted by their memories of the Troubles, and to give thanks that ultimately Operation Banner was a success: swords were turned to ploughshares as peace was restored, guns were decommissioned and the troops were able to withdraw.

Of course, the peace that was established by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 has not been complete: it was never perfect, it was always fragile, and some would argue that it was achieved at too great a price in terms of dirty compromises and the denial of justice to the bereaved families of British servicemen. But nevertheless there has been 20 years of relative peace that is an absolute contrast to the 30 years of hell that preceded it. There is a whole generation of young people who have never known the Troubles, whose personalities and communities are not distorted by hatred and violence and because of that there is hope

for Northern Ireland. And it's the guys of Operation Banner who should get the credit for that.

Today, in 2019, that peace, which they ensured through their heroism and bravery, is more fragile than ever. This is not a day for politics. We do not want the memory of those who fell in Operation Banner to be marred by politics. We do not want to hear the word Brexit cross anyone's lips. But we do need to recognise that there is a risk that the way Britain leaves the EU in just 75 days' time could unravel the Good Friday agreement. It could commit our sons and daughters, another two generations of young people, to endure the hell we are commemorating today. It could undo all that Operation Banner achieved.

And so we pray for the peace of the island of Ireland in order to honour the memory of those who were killed and to express our heart-felt gratitude to all who served in Operation Banner. Amen.