

King Charles: Patron of a Disgraced Regiment

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Global Research, May 09, 2023

[Declassified UK](#) 5 May 2023

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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As Charles accedes to the throne, his role as Colonel-in-Chief of the Parachute Regiment for 46 years is not forgotten in Northern Ireland where Paras have committed a shocking number of killings, some still being revealed in court.

As some people across Britain celebrate the accession of King Charles III – complete with a carefully-crafted image – his status as Colonel-in-Chief of the British army's Parachute Regiment is not forgotten in Northern Ireland, despite the presence of Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill at the coronation.

O'Neill has made it clear she is attending Westminster Abbey in her role as First Minister designate of the suspended Stormont power-sharing executive – rather than as the deputy leader of her republican party.

Many of Sinn Féin's followers, however, while understanding her rationale – that she must represent both communities in Northern Ireland – must be scratching their heads. A recent poll found 0% of her party's supporters favour the monarchy.

It will not have passed them by that Charles continues to personify the Parachute Regiment whose record in Ireland includes an eye-watering number of criminal actions, some of which are still being revealed in court.

This is, after all, the regiment behind the shooting of 14 people in January 1972 on Bloody Sunday in Derry, [labelled](#) as “unjustified and unjustifiable” by former British prime minister David Cameron in his response to the findings of the Saville Tribunal.

It is also the regiment behind the shootings of a further 11 people in the “Ballymurphy massacre”, five months before Bloody Sunday.

An inquest [verdict](#) in May 2021 found all the dead were innocent. Victims included a priest trying to help the wounded and a mother of eight who bled to death where she lay for hours,

unattended.

The Coroner, Mrs Justice Keegan (now the Lady Chief Justice for Northern Ireland) concluded: "What is very clear, is that all of the deceased in the series of inquests were entirely innocent of any wrongdoing on the day in question".

There have been no successful prosecutions in either case, despite the Parachute Regiment wrongfully killing at least 25 civilians in these two tragedies alone.

Colonel-in-Chief

The regiment's ever-growing record of carrying out particularly vicious attacks on members on both communities in Northern Ireland has not, it seems, instigated any sudden crisis of conscience in the royal breast.

Charles was appointed Colonel-in-Chief of the Parachute Regiment in 1977, just five years after Bloody Sunday. He went through their parachute jump course in 1978, so he could "look them in the eye" when wearing the infamous red beret.

Over the last 25 years, he held at least 75 meetings with the regiment, including trips to see them in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to the Court Circular – the monarchy's official diary.

In July 2010, a few weeks after the Saville Report into Bloody Sunday was published, Charles received eight senior Parachute Regiment commanders at Clarence House, with prime minister David Cameron calling in later that day.

Since Lord Saville's inquiry concluded, more damning evidence about the regiment has come to light.

Just a month ago, the High Court in Belfast awarded a further £350,000 against the state for the [waterboarding](#) of a Belfast man, Liam Holden, at the hands of the Paras in a requisitioned school in the Shankill Road district of Belfast.

'An enjoyable experience'

It was in the Shankill area, a strongly-protestant part of the city, that regiment members shot dead Ritchie McKinnie, a protestant father of five, and Robert Johnston, another protestant, in September 1972 – killings that made loyalist leader Ian Paisley so angry he withdrew from political talks with London demanding an inquiry.

One soldier described the two murders later, in evidence presented to the Saville Tribunal, as "an enjoyable experience and one which greatly enhanced my standing within the battalion".

What is particularly galling for its victims, and their supporters, in Northern Ireland is this unabashed pleasure that members of the Parachute Regiment appeared to take in their actions.

"We had as much beer as we could take and we had all the women we could handle. It was absolutely brilliant. A soldier's dream", one Para boasted in a book written by BBC journalist, Peter Taylor.

Innocent

Particularly horrific is the way the regiment's members handled the body of trainee teacher, Patrick Magee, who was shot alongside a friend, Frank McGuinness, by members of the Royal Anglians as they sheltered in the grounds of a Belfast school in April 1972.

An ambulance driver has given witness evidence to the inquest, of how: "We were stopped at the front of the school and a casualty was dragged, feet first, by a member of the (Parachute) regiment from the side of the school, along the front, and down the steps, with his face banging on each step".

This is corroborated by a second ambulance driver who told the inquest, "I saw soldiers drag the body of Mr. Patrick Magee down the steps of the school by the legs, his arms were outstretched, and his head bounced off each step."

Both ambulance drivers told an inquest of how they were ordered, by a Para, to drive through a nearby strongly-loyalist area where hostile crowds gathered.

Ambulance driver 2 told the inquest how a Para had held up two fingers to the crowd, indicating they were carrying two patients causing some "glee" in the crowd.

The Northern Ireland Office later admitted that both men were innocent and had been shot in error. It accepted "without reservation" that the two men were walking towards McGuinness's home and had taken "shelter" when firing broke out.

'Got a kill'

Sergeant Alan McVittie, a Para, shot and killed South Armagh man Harry Thornton (28) in August 1971, mistaking a van backfire for a gun-shot.

Members of the Parachute Regiment subsequently used the dead man's skull as an ash-tray, [according](#) to fellow Para Henry Gow (who, under the alias Harry McCallion wrote about his exploits in a 1995 book, *Killing Zone*).

During questioning at the inquest into the Ballymurphy massacre, Gow said the Paras in his unit would run a sweepstake to reward soldiers who "got a kill". The winner, he told the inquest "got the pot" and would use the money to "go for a piss-up".

Oisín McConville, a Gaelic football sporting star from the South Armagh village of Crossmaglen, [summed up](#) the nationalist experience of the Paras: "If they were in town you were afraid to go outside the door because they were the worst. They would literally batter you if they got you on your own. It was just constant to be honest".

Yet another Para killing that lives long in the memory is that of 12-year-old Majella O'Hare, shot in the back on 14 August 1976 as she walked with other children in a South Armagh country lane.

A neighbour and nurse, Alice Devlin, said Majella was thrown "like a piece of meat" into a helicopter, head first, and died on the way to hospital.

The 'shot list'

The role of General Sir Michael Jackson in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday deserves special mention. At the time he was adjutant, with the rank of captain, of the [Paras](#) 1st Battalion.

Not satisfied with the men under his command killing 13 civilians (a 14th died later), Jackson personally drew up in his own handwriting, on the night after the massacre, what has since become [known](#) as the "shot list".

This was a list, entirely untrue, attempting to justify the shooting of all the victims by labelling the dead as "nail-bombers", pistol-firers" or "carrying rifles".

Jackson went on to become the highest ranking officer in the British Army, and would be photographed with Charles on numerous occasions.

Asked about the errors in the "shot list", Jackson said he could not "provide an explanation. But I am sure that any errors or omissions are the result of oversight or some other proper and innocent reason."

He added: "If it is to be suggested that there was attempt [sic] by anyone to sanitise ... a true version of events, for whatever reason, I would emphatically reject such a suggestion."

Either King Charles is not aware of the views of a significant number of those he claims as his subjects on the actions of the Parachute Regiment in Northern Ireland – in which case he is negligent.

Or he is aware and has decided that, despite the ignominy in which the regiment is held, that he will retain the "honour" of being its Colonel-in-Chief – in which case he dishonours himself.

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Featured image: Victims of the Parachute Regiment. (Photos: Declassified UK)

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