

**FINAL**

**Newsletter Article RIR Belfast Parade**

**Embargoed until Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> November.**

Nearly 3000 innocent people from 91 countries were murdered in the 9/11 massacre. Over 1,000 of these were Irish either by birth or descent. The Al Qaeda terrorists who planned this horror in the caves of Tora Bora did not discriminate between the race and religion of their western victims.

Al Qaeda were sheltered and sustained by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. It is almost incomprehensible for us, living in an open western society, to understand the horrors that the Taliban inflicted upon their own people, particularly women. It is almost easier to list what women were allowed to do than to list the bizarre restrictions forced on them. Women could only receive medical treatment from female doctors, and their numbers were sharply reduced. Horrific numbers of young mothers died in childbirth. Women could only appear in public accompanied by a male relative. One young mother was reportedly shot by the Taliban for taking her desperately ill child to a doctor on her own. The education of women was drastically restricted. Girls were banned from school and women students had to leave university. Thousands of skilled teachers and Government workers were forced out of their jobs. There is clearly a huge task, helping build a more normal society in Afghanistan and preventing the return of the hated Taliban. So an unprecedented 40 nations are cooperating militarily under nine UN Security Council Resolutions and at the invitation of the democratic government.

For the past six months the 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment, has been deployed on Herrick 8. Their immensely difficult job was to mentor and assist the Afghan National Army in all aspects of its operations. It is vital for the future security of Afghanistan that a non sectarian army is created.

It needs a unique set of skills to take on raw Afghan troops from a wide variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, speaking different languages, to teach them, to encourage them, to organise them and then accompany them into battle. This job has been performed supremely well by the Royal Irish, in one of the toughest and most dangerous battle zones in Helmand.

Captain Brian Johnston attributed the Regiment's congeniality to a unique bond between the officers and men, saying, "I think it's due in no small part to coming from Ireland ... It's that ability to relate to people and have an affinity with other cultures that Irish people have – even the guys in the battalion that aren't from Ireland soon learn to appreciate that quality."

This immensely difficult work has been carried out by people from across the community in Northern Ireland and a good number from south of the border. With horrible symmetry two friends were injured, one a catholic from Dublin the other a protestant from Belfast. Over 70 have been injured and tragically, Ranger Justin Cupples was killed days before the end of the tour. Our thoughts will be with his family and friends as we celebrate our troops' return.

Two weeks ago the Royal Irish paraded through Market Drayton in my constituency, the nearest town to their barracks at Tern Hill. A couple of days later following a service in the Abbey Church, they marched through the County Town of Shrewsbury.

It is absolutely right that the people of Shropshire should have been given an opportunity to honour publicly the selfless bravery and service of these young Irishmen who have put their lives on the line to protect us all whilst helping to bring security and prosperity to the divided country of Afghanistan.

The reception in both towns was tremendous; large numbers of people turned out. There was a genuine sense of admiration at what they had been doing and gratitude that they had nearly all come home safely. It was in no way jingoistic; there was not a hint of triumphalism. Afterwards we shared some curry back at the barracks and by chance three of the men I spoke to came from the Republic. They were astonished by the reception but I was equally moved to hear of the dangerous work they have been carrying out on our behalf.

Drawn together from all over Ireland, these young soldiers are an example to all. They can work well together, freely and harmoniously and deliver the goods. They are not bogged down in recriminations, the petty bickering and in the squabbles of the past. We can all be justly proud of them; I hope that their immensely difficult work will be celebrated by the people of Belfast with the same enthusiasm that they received in Shropshire.

**Owen Paterson**  
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Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland