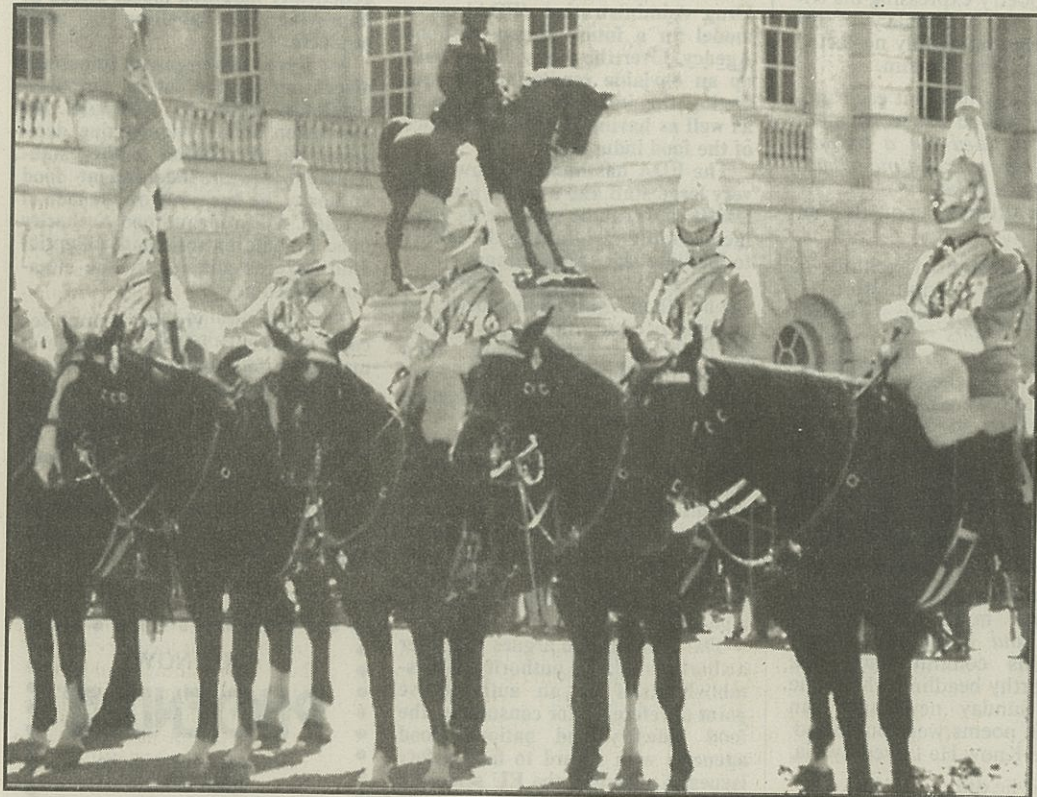


Just whose side are you on anyway?



Ceremonial duties give the British army an air of glamour, but the country's colonial past often dissuades members of ethnic minorities living in Britain from joining up

FOR centuries, the Irish soldier has been a feature of worldwide warfare. Through their fighting and dying they have captured the imagination of those who recorded the events of the American War of Independence and Civil War, the British war against the Boers and the two world wars. Today, while many young men and women enlist every year to join the army in this country, there are those who still opt for service in the British army.

At least 150 men from the Republic of Ireland join the British army every year, along with a further 450 from Irish communities in the UK. They are doing what their grandfathers and great-grandfathers did in both world wars — joining the British army for reasons ranging from a feeling of moral duty to a desire for adventure.

Capt Tom Clonan of the Irish Defence Forces Press Office says one reason Irish citizens join the British army is because "it's more difficult to get into the Irish Army". "The average candidate would at least have a Leaving Cert. We also have a very rigorous fitness test," he says. But, unlike their British colleagues, Irish soldiers in the British army face opposition not only in combat

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Geraldine Comiskey reports on Irish and other non-national recruits to the British army

situations but also at home. As both communities in Northern Ireland share power, there is no such thing as peace for an Irish member of the British forces.

"The neighbours don't know I'm in the British army... The IRA might have given up fighting, but there's always going to be some splinter group or other who might kill my family," explains one soldier.

Britain and Ireland now fight the same battles. From Kosovo to East Timor, both countries have supplied UN peacekeeping troops. Yet, while the Irish Army has a distinguished reputation of sending peacekeeping troops to war zones, it is easy to see the appeal of joining a bigger army, which can send troops into combat at short notice anywhere.

As citizens of a former Commonwealth country, Irish people can apply to join any regiment in the British army. However, most

choose to join the Irish Guards. The 600-strong battalion attracts most of its recruits from Northern Ireland and parts of England where there is a strong Irish community, such as Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Reading and London. The battalion does not actively recruit in the Republic, and those wishing to enlist are advised to apply through the British Embassy.

The "Micks", as the Irish Guards are known, have a proud reputation, which includes battle honours in both world wars, and have been in every conflict involving the UK since 1945. They also provide the highest number of recruits into the SAS and are regarded as among the elite of the British defence forces.

However, along with other battalions in the Household Division, they suffer from the misconception that elite means exclusive, and that they only take people

from the upper classes. To dispel the myths and boost recruitment, members of the Household Division take part in "Project Panorama", a scheme aimed at encouraging people from ethnic minorities (including the Irish) to join the British army — by giving them a taste of army life.

Project Panorama is organised by the Army Youth Team, whose members visit schools, youth clubs, community groups and sporting organisations. They arranged for a group of teenagers (and myself) to join the Household Division for a few days. We received a crash-course in unarmed combat, survival skills, physical training, and even horse-riding with the Household Cavalry.

While Project Panorama is aimed at those from ethnic minorities and disadvantaged areas, teenagers from a more traditional British background are also in-

cluded to take part. By integrating those from ethnic backgrounds with those from a more traditional British culture, the project aims to make everyone feel at home in the army.

The problems in attracting people from ethnic minorities into the army are deep-rooted. "Peer pressure prevents a lot of youngsters from ethnic minorities taking part in activities such as this," I was told, upon noticing that only a small number of teenagers in my group were from "ethnic" backgrounds. The reluctance of those from ethnic minorities to give the army a chance is also "often because their parents or grandparents fled from countries where there are oppressive military regimes", a non-commissioned officer involved in recruiting racial minorities explained.

The biggest culture shock, however, is for seasoned army cooks, who have to cope with a variety of diets. Where once "meat and two veg" would have been the order of the day, now army canteens must serve kosher, halal, vegetarian and vegan food. For the Irish contingent of the British army, it is unlikely that they have problems eating traditional British food. This is no doubt one area, among others, where they fit in well, as if they were at home.

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