

Battle of the Bogside

The Battle of the Bogside, 30 years ago this week, not only transformed Londonderry forever, but sparked off a wind of change that swept through Northern Ireland.

IAN STARRETT remembers that incredible August of '69 and, in the first of a two-part series, today looks at three days that were a turning point in Ulster's history.

A MESSAGE in a bottle gave due notice of the mayhem that was to follow.

The milkman picking up the early-morning empties from a Bogside doorstep glanced at it and read the quickly scrawled note - "No milk today thank you but please leave 200 empty bottles."

Knowing that the petrol bomb makers were on the scrounge for empties, local folklore has it that he became the fastest milkman in the west, hightailing it out of the Bogside at break-neck speed.

Other preparations were being made too, makeshift barricades were erected at Bogside street corners and on Tuesday, August 12, 1969, when the Apprentice Boys' Relief of Derry celebrations got under way you could have cut the tension with a 1689 sword.

There had been dire warnings of trouble if the parade by the loyal order went ahead. Retired Derry Journal editor Frank Curran, in his book *Countdown to Disaster*, recalled that the *News Letter* in '69 "published a survey showing that 90 per cent of the people of Northern Ireland would be glad to see an end to parades and demonstrations for many months".

He added: "Even Ian Paisley's right-hand man, Major Ronald Bunting, said that he would be happy to see no parades for some time to allow communal disorder to subside."

Civil rights activist John Hume also expressed his views. The school-teacher, who was eventually to become SDLP leader, said: "The Apprentice Boys have a perfect right to march but it is a matter for them to exercise that right. It is on their shoulders and the Government's that will rest the final responsibility if trouble does arise."

The loyalist parade did go ahead and by early afternoon in republican streets the rioting had already started. At 4.40pm the first petrol bomb was hurled and by nightfall flaming showers of petrol bombs were raining down on the black-clad RUC from the top of the towering Rossville flats. The Battle of the Bogside had truly begun and for three endless, mind-battering, exhausting days it would continue as the world watched a city slide into the depths of anarchy.

Those of us who remember it will never forget the choking nausea created by the CS gas fired by the police in defence. In the rain-free, muggy August of '69 it seeped through into the fringes of the city centre, slithering like a fog down our throats and wafting indiscriminately into the eyes of even the most innocent shopper, passer-by or gawping journalist, who'd never experienced anything like it on the



CHARGE: protestors retreat as police, armed with batons and riot shields, move forward



TENSE WAIT: an RUC officer dressed in riot gear and gas mask

streets of Britain.

The gasping rioters sent an urgent request to the Eire government for gas masks. When they were refused they defied its continued use by shrouding themselves in wet blankets, dipping cotton wool in vinegar, soaking handkerchiefs in sodium bicarbonate. It was said that a group of Paris Sorbonne rioters slipped over to Ulster so that they could learn how to conduct a "proper street riot" from the innovative jobless of the Bogside.

Even the paving stones were smashed to build barricades to completely seal off the area from the RUC. A famous picture was taken of a young Bernadette Devlin, later found guilty of incitement to hatred and sent to jail, shattering a paving

stone. Her defence counsel, Dingle Foot QC, told the court that Miss Devlin's actions in the Bogside could be compared with "the roles of Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale". He said that she had played a responsible role and had been concerned with the safety of women and children.

For 50 hours, day and night, three decades ago this very week, in the puzzling maze of narrow side streets, RUC riot police played cat and mouse with dissident locals. At the junction of William Street and Waterloo Place the violence threatened to surge into the commercial heart of the city and by nightfall on the Tuesday Richardson's shirt factory was one of several buildings ablaze.

After 24 hours, on the night of Au-

gust 13, Jack Lynch, then prime minister of the Republic, announced that the Dublin government "could not stand by". Mr Lynch also claimed the Unionist Government of Northern Ireland had clearly lost control - by this stage street rioting had also flared in Belfast, Strabane, Coalisland, Newry and Armagh - and he urged the British Government to call in a UN peace keeping force.

The Sunday Times Insight Team was later to claim that there was in existence that day an Irish army plan to occupy Londonderry and other places in Northern Ireland. But the Republic's government never intervened, apart from dispatching first aid supplies to the rioters and setting up a series of field hospitals just inside the border in Donegal to treat injured Bogside rioters who feared arrest if they went to Altnagelvin Hospital.

By Wednesday night the rioters appeared to be winning, the RUC looked to have been beaten into submission, exhausted officers slumped in corners for a breather when there was a rare lull in what seemed like a never-ending onslaught.

By sheer weight of numbers the Bogside rioters - inspired by a rumour that Eire troops were about to cross the Letterkenny Road border just a couple of miles away to aid them - ensured the RUC made little or no territorial headway. Nobody among the "children of the revolution" dared yell the old Derry loyalist battlecry "No Surrender" but many a Bogside felt like it in those turbulent but historic hours.

There were horrifying scenes, appalling injuries. An RUC sergeant was engulfed in flames and his colleagues rolled him on the ground to put the fire out. Other officers had their bodies and faces slashed by rocks. Civilians too were cut down in the miscellaneous flak of the battle. Altnagelvin Hospital by this stage had

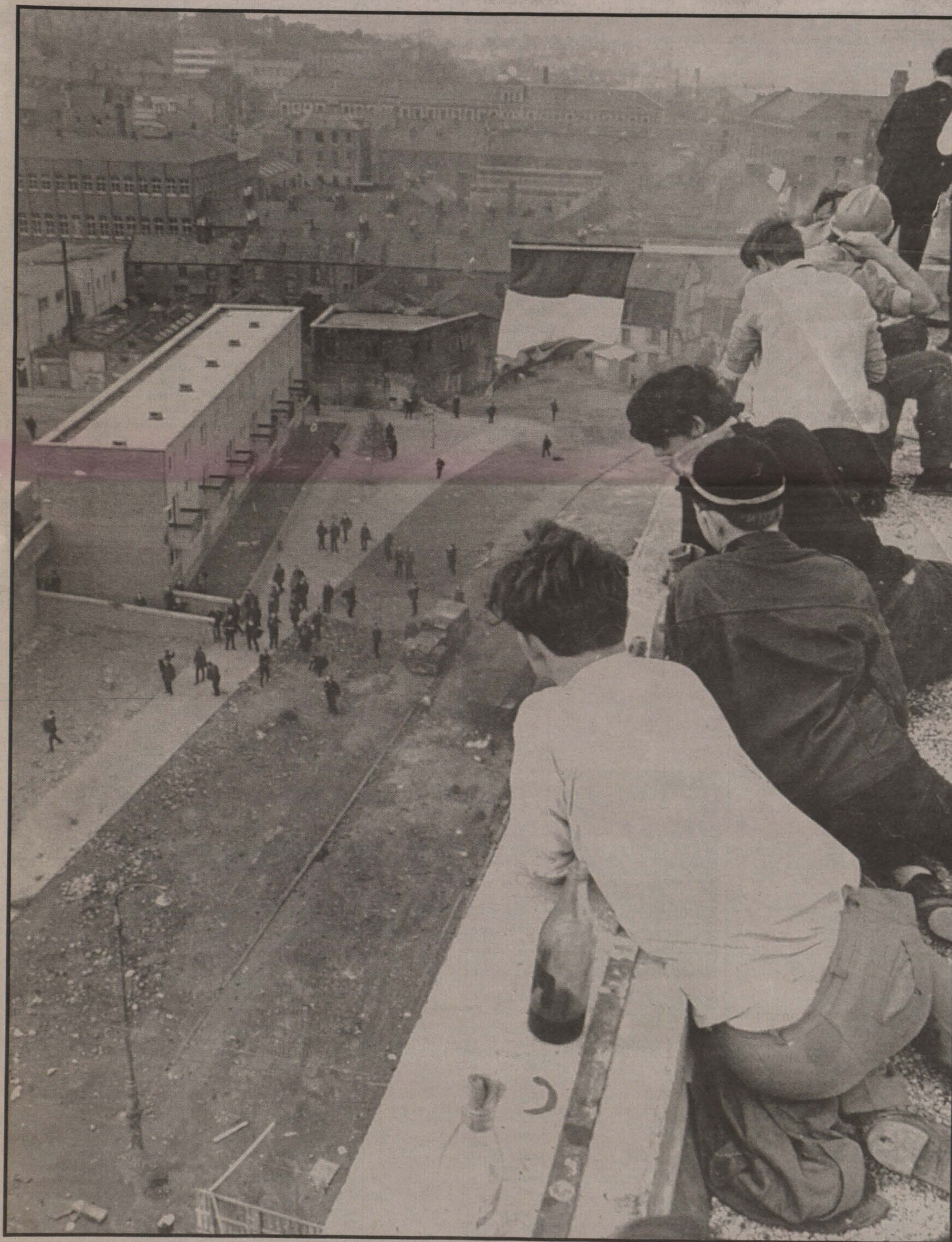
a casualty list in triple figures.

When Thursday August 14 dawned, ominously unseasonably bleak, it was clear that the hour of reckoning, for better or worse, was very close. Anarchy reigned, RUC chiefs could confine the insurrection no longer without being given the authority to use their guns. Unionist politicians called for the B-Specials to join the effort to take control of the Bogside. And all the time the feeling was that the Republic's army was just a 10-minute drive away, ready to defend the Bogside. On the other hand, by afternoon, B-Specials armed with rifles were marching through Londonderry city centre. All that was needed was someone to light the fuse and the powder keg would have exploded.

The feared Doomsday situation never came. At 5 o'clock that hushed, windless summer night British soldiers of the Prince of Wales' Own Regiment crossed Craigavon Bridge and strung barbed wire curls across the end of William Street. The "saviours" of the Roman Catholic Bogside had, somewhat ironically, come from the direction of the Protestant Waterside, securing a latter-day Relief of Derry. Bernadette Devlin, the young firebrand MP, and John Hume had earlier called for the deployment of the British soldiers and finally Home Secretary James Callaghan gave the order.

Even today, 30 bloodstained years on, I can vividly remember the strangeness that evening of seeing steel-helmeted British soldiers in a city where previously I'd only seen gun-carrying squaddies on the big silver screens of the Strand, Midland and Rialto cinemas. We all thought it was the beginning of the end of what is known as the Troubles, but it really was only the end of the beginning.

History has a dirty habit of playing tricks like that.



HIGH GROUND: rioters on a rooftop in the Bogside look down on the RUC below

Summer of discontent sets scene for conflict

THE RUC in Londonderry had been in the firing line long before the Battle of the Bogside.

One of the fiercest riots during the summer of '69 had been over the April 18-20 weekend after a civil rights march had been banned by the Government. The day after Bernadette Devlin had been elected Mid Ulster MP at Westminster she arrived in Londonderry. The sight she was greeted with is recalled in her book *The Price of My Soul*:

"I arrived at 10 o'clock in the evening, Derry was a battlefield. It was like coming into beleaguered Budapest; you had to negotiate around piles of bricks and rubble and broken glass which were cluttering the roads. Every family in the Bogside... had left its home and was roaming the streets seeking whom it would devour. The police had arrived in their hundreds and pitched battles between the police and the Catholics were in progress."

Recounting the events of April 20, the now Mrs McAliskey talked about the leadership roles played by John Hume, who later won the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble, and Protestant civil rights activist Ivan Cooper.

She wrote: "The next day, Sunday, with the police still occupying the Bogside, I left for Belfast. John Hume and Ivan Cooper... got the whole population of the Bogside to evacuate, took this crowd of several thousand people up Creggan Hill, and told the police they had two hours to get out. If they weren't clear of the Bogside by then, the people were coming back in and the police would be responsible for the consequences. The police stuck it out until about 15 minutes before the end of the ultimatum. They then left."

That same summer Samuel Devenney died of a heart condition three months after RUC officers chasing rioters burst into his Bogside home and allegedly beat him. Around 20,000 people attended his funeral. No charges were brought arising from the incident and Chief Constable Sir Arthur Young's 1970 investigation into the events of that day revealed a "conspiracy of silence" among the policemen involved.

More riots followed that summer of '69 and then came the most famous of them all - the Battle of the Bogside.

TOMORROW Ian Starrett reports on the Bogside of today - three decades on