

<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/columnists/kevin-myers/kevin-myers-apply-spirit-of-islandbridge-to-ww2-heroes-26735646.html>

Kevin Myers – 24 May 2011

WE may as well begin with an audit of the royal visit. What, if anything, went awry? It is not churlish to do this, merely adult -- and one thing that was certainly not right was the place of honour that was given to the Ulster Defence Association at Islandbridge.

Most servicemen of both traditions did not share that privilege, and nor did the relatives of the hundreds of victims of the UDA/UFF.

Moreover, we also had the pleasure of hearing the UDA leader Jackie McDonald justify this preferment because of the UDA's role as "combatants".

So be it; but it is surely a violation of the spirit of Islandbridge that these fine fellows apparently were elevated above those whom they had bereaved.

Yes, no doubt this was done out of purely honourable motives -- but nonetheless, it is wrong. So is this the new definition of "peace"? And for how long shall this continue?

As once we forgot the 40,000 dead of The Great War, we must not forget the 4,000 dead of The Long War.

One primary reason why Ireland could even tolerate a resumption of an IRA campaign 40 years ago was that there was no real knowledge of the Troubles, 1916-23 -- no list of the dead, of the circumstances of their deaths, of who they actually were. Fortunately -- and seldom has that word been more grammatically correct while being so ludicrously inappropriate -- David McKittrick has produced the defining and definitive document of our last Troubles: 'Lost Lives'. Every school in Ireland should have at least one copy. No one should be unaware of the abominable consequences of our culture of violence, both for individuals and for society as a whole.

Ireland also needs a physical monument for ALL our Troubles dead: civilians, police, soldiers and paramilitaries.

And we need a freely accessible database that lists the victims in three categories: alphabetically, chronologically and by age, so people can instantly learn about Angela Gallagher, aged 18 months, shot dead by the IRA in a botched attack on a British army foot patrol 40 years ago this September; and Martha Smylie, aged 91, blown up in her old people's home a year later in a UDA bomb attack on a nearby hotel full of Catholic revellers. Hence, apparently, the term "combatants".

We cannot undo all deeds, but we can undo some.

In May 1945, Irish Army deserters who had enlisted with the allies began to return home in the belief there was an amnesty. But there wasn't, and in the largest arrest operation since the Civil War, military police began to check incoming ferries and cross-border traffic.

Just 66 years ago this week, two such deserters, Patrick Kehoe, RAF; and Patrick Shannon, British army, were arrested at Dundalk.

Flight Sergeant Kehoe had flown 22 missions over Germany before being shot down in March 1945 and taken prisoner. Corporal Shannon had served in North Africa, Sicily and Italy, where he was captured. Upon liberation, an only child, he had been given special leave to go home and see his terminally ill mother.

Despite this, Shannon (like Kehoe) was kept in military custody for over two weeks, as hundreds of other returning servicemen were arrested.

They included Patrick Mortimer (22), who had deserted the Army in 1943, joined the British Paras, and jumped in both the D-Day landings and Rhine Crossing.

Six weeks after the names "Belsen" and "Buchenwald" made their first appearance in Irish newspapers, he was arrested arriving at Dun Laoghaire, on June 6, 1945: the first anniversary of the day he had helped begin the liberation of Europe.

Counsel for Keogh and Shannon, Captain Peadar Cowan, told their court martial in Collins Barracks that they had gone to serve against "what His Holiness has called 'the satanic spectre of Nazism'". The two men were sentenced to 156 days in military custody, but the sentence was put aside and they were released, as later was Mortimer.

Asked in the Dail by Mr S O'Leary TD about the hundreds of other such cases pending, the Minister for Defence Oscar Traynor declared: "I am afraid that I cannot share the deputy's apparent solicitude for deserters. They are, in my opinion, worthy of very little consideration."

However, he continued, since it simply wasn't worth the trouble of dealing with them all "as they deserved", Army deserters who had fought for the allies would no longer be court-martialled.

Instead, by special government decree, these men -- numbering many thousands -- would NEVER be able to claim old age pensions or unemployment benefits in Ireland; would NEVER be allowed to work for the Irish State; and would NEVER be employed in a local authority, statutory body, or public board. In other words, they become official non-persons.

As the last of the Irishmen who volunteered to fight Nazism near their end, Alan Shatter, the Minister for Justice and Defence -- who I suspect is probably quite familiar with the larger issues here -- has it twice-over within his power to revoke the Special Powers Order of 1945, and issue an unconditional pardon to those Irishmen, both living and dead, who joined the war against Hitler's Germany.

The spirit of Islandbridge demands it.