

The Tramp of Marching Yanks

January 1941, almost a year before the United States entered World War II plans were laid to set up US Army Corps bases in Northern Ireland and to develop Derry as the terminal for convoys crossing the Atlantic to Britain. On 30 June 1941, 362 "civilian technicians" arrived at Derry and their numbers more than doubled over the next five months as they built a new quay at Lisahally, a ship repair base, a radio station, personnel camps, an administrative headquarters and ammunition and storage depots. Then, on 26 January 1942, the first American troops stepped ashore at Belfast's Dufferin Quay under the command of the youngest major-general in the US Army. Sir Basil Brooke had been summoned to London a few days before and told my his uncle, Alan Brooke, chief of imperial general staff, that Churchill wanted him "to see personally that the hospitality accorded to the Americans was of the very highest order." it was, and the band of the Royal Ulster Rifles played the "Star Spangled Banner" to give what the **Belfast Telegraph** called "a hearty Ulster welcome." This newspaper continued:

Over the Province prowling enemy planes received a hot reception from ground defences, and for a time the thudding of distant heavy gunfire synchronized with the tramp of marching Yanks as they clattered down the gangways and on to the square-sets of the landing stage ... Many of the Americans had thought that at the beginning in camp they would have to live "rough", and they were pleasantly surprised ... The inevitable dog mascot has made its appearance, an American soldier somehow managing to bring along a mongrel known as "jitterbug."

At Stormont (Northern Ireland's Parliament) Andrews admitted that an "event so historic and so significant" had given him "a thrill of emotion", and he added:

Between the United States and Ulster there are many bonds that cannot be broken, bonds created by kinship and language, identity of outlook and a common faith in democracy.

In February the US Naval Operating Base in Derry was officially commissioned and by May 1942 the number of Americans in Northern Ireland had reached thirty-seven thousand. On the eastern shores of Lough Neagh a new town sprang up at Langford Lodge; here the Lockheed Overseas Corporation, on behalf of the American government, repaired and maintained aircraft. United States airmen were also stationed at airfields at Eglinton, Maydown and Mullaghmore in Co. Londonderry; Toome and Maghaberry in Co. Antrim; Cluntoe in Co. Tyrone; and Greencastle in Co. Down. During the Autumn of 1942 the first contingents of American troops had moved on to North Africa in preparation for the invasion of Italy. A year later greater numbers arrived in readiness for the Normandy landings and for a time there were 120,000 Americans in the North. The United States spent seventy-five million US dollars developing its facilities in Derry, particularly for the repair, maintenance and refueling of convoy escorts. The Americans made their headquarters at Talbot House, near Magee College, and constructed a massive underground bunker there. Here, too, was the most important naval radio station in the European theatre of operations. At one stage 149 vessels were based in Derry to patrol the Western Approaches, together with some 20,000 sailors. By 1943, the official historian John W. Blake has written, Derry held the key to victory in the Atlantic ... By that critical Spring when the battle for the security of our Atlantic lifelines finally turned our way, Londonderry was the most important escort base in the North-Western approaches. Everybody at Londonderry cooperated in this supreme effort.

For a while outsiders - Americans, Canadians, the free forces of occupied states, and refugees from Gibraltar - seemed as numerous as the citizens themselves. During the second half of 1943, when units of the XV (US) Army Corps disembarked to prepare for the D-day landings, the numbers were so great that they had to be spread across Northern Ireland. The first arrivals went to the Newry-Armagh area and later contingents were based at Newcastle, Cookstown, Omagh, Lurgan and at several points in Co. Fermanagh. Watching them marching through Bangor, David Davidson concluded: "You could not help but like them." Training films led Americans to expect a much more backward society in the North than they found. Nevertheless, the contrast in living standards was striking. As one woman in Newry remembers:

Food and luxuries were very short in Newry, but I can tell you that Yanks did not go short. They were a great attraction to all the kids and their families. If you had a Yank visiting your house, you never went short. We all learned to chew gum and smoke Camel cigarettes.

From the outset the Americans were great favourites with the children in Derry Jim Girr recalled:

when they took over the picture houses. Every child of school age was marched over to the pictures. You got a big bag of sweets going up to the picture show which lasted three or four hours. It was a great treat as sweets were scarce. The American "technicians" paid for everything.

Local men, however, resented the competition for the attention of young women. Charlie Gallagher, an air-raid precautions officer in Derry, recollected: lowe were getting our eyes wiped left, right and centre ... The British used to say of the Americans that they were "over-fed, over-paid, over-sexed and over here". The Americans' reply was that the British were "under-paid, under-fed, under-sexed and under Eisenhower". A Mass Observation reporter in Northern Ireland summed up the Americans off-duty activities as "pubs and pickups". Young women from the Shankill who consorted with Americans, according to Rita McKi ttrick, were seen as "brash and had a fast reputation. You were sort of blacklisted if you went out with them", and her mother told her to have nothing to do with them or she would "get killed". At best such women were subjected to scoffs and sneers:

*Coming in with a Yank on a jeep,
All the girls in Derry thinks its cheap.
With their clothes up to their bums
And their chewing Yankee gum,
Coming in with a Yank on a jeep.*

At times the American presence led to severe friction. Jimmy Penton remembers that in Protestant east Belfast Americans were "warned off Dee Street" and "never came near it". On the Falls Joseph McCann recalled:

Girls who had gone out with them were likely to get their hair cut off - It was a common occurrence. Fights were sometimes sparked off by troops asking for girls.

In October 1942 a black GI was killed in a fight between local men and American troops in Antrim town. A few weeks earlier an American quartermaster had predicted "bloodshed in the near future", observing that white soldiers were irked by the popularity of blacks: "The

girls really go for them in preference to white boys."

Most people, however, were flattered by the attention Americans gave to Northern Ireland. The 2nd Infantry Division made Narrow Water Castle its headquarters and local people watched in fascination as troops practiced hand-to-hand combat, dug trenches and put up fortifications around Newry, and were taught how to drive tanks over the south Down countryside - Ballymacdermot cairn had to be repaired hastily when a tank drove into it. Generals Eisenhower and Patton inspected their troops and amongst those who came to entertain the man were Larry Adler, George Formby, and Glenn Miller and his orchestra.

(Excerpted from [A History of Ulster](#) by Jonathan Bardon. the author.)

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