

UK military step up marches and parades on streets of Britain

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On September 13, several hundred soldiers from The Black Watch, 3rd Battalion of The Royal Regiment of Scotland marched through the streets of Inverness in full battle gear. The battalion had recently returned from a six-month tour in Iraq training Iraqi security forces. In a series of homecoming parades, the battalion marched over four successive days through towns and cities in Black Watch's traditional recruiting areas, including Forfar, Dunfermline and Perth.

The Black Watch played a critical role in the war against Iraq, as British imperialism escalated its intervention after the illegal 2003 invasion. In October 2004, the regiment was moved 380 miles north from southern Iraq to Camp Dogwood, 20 miles (32 km) southwest of Baghdad. This was done in order to allow the UK's main partner in crime, the US, to concentrate its forces on the bloody suppression of Fallujah.

Within 48 hours of arriving at their new base, the regiment suffered its first fatalities, as five members of the 850-strong Black Watch were killed and several others seriously wounded. The deaths led to growing opposition to the war, which the year before had sparked an anti-war march by some 2 million people in London.

The Inverness event was clearly intended to provide an intimidating display of firepower. Soldiers on the march wore body armour and carried assault rifles with bayonets attached. Some wore camouflage and carried sniper rifles. The soldiers marched alongside several large armoured vehicles equipped with manned, high-calibre machine guns. A section of the march appeared to be mimicking the routines of a live patrol.

The show of force in Scotland is one particularly extreme example of a succession of military parades that have taken place across Britain in just the last few months.

Many of these demonstrations have been held in connection with the awarding of the "freedom" of the

city, town or borough to a particular regiment. Voted on by local councils, this is the highest honour a local authority can award.

In the case of military units, it gives the soldiers in question the right to "march with drums beating, bands playing, colours flying and bayonets fixed" through the streets of the town. There are roughly 640 such "freedoms" currently awarded to military bodies—at least 280 of which have been given since 2008.

* In February, the Royal Marines were granted the freedom of Birmingham—the UK's second largest city—in a ceremony in its central square, followed by a parade along its main streets.

* On June 3, soldiers from the 21 Engineer Regiment exercised the Corps of Royal Engineers' freedom to march in Ripon, Yorkshire.

* Earlier this month, 500 soldiers of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers were allowed to march from the Tower of London to Guildhall. The City of London's Square Mile was closed while the parade took place.

* The 75 Engineers Regiment marched through Warrington, Cheshire last Saturday, having been awarded the Freedom of the Borough in 2013.

In many places, Freedom of the Borough parades were held in connection with Armed Forces Week. The Yorkshire Regiment marched through Redcar and Stockton in the North East of England on June 28 as part of a series of events, including a drill display and flyover by a Dakota Royal Air Force plane. Redcar's high street was decked in red, white and blue bunting for the occasion.

Two days later, St Ives hosted 120 soldiers of the 42 Engineer Regiment for the same occasion, after which residents were encouraged to get to know the regiment at a local museum. In July, plans were announced for hundreds of soldiers from the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers to march in Nuneaton on June 9 next year, to mark the

75th anniversary of D-Day and celebrate Armed Forces Day. The town closed its streets for a march by soldiers from the 30 Signal Regiment in 2015.

Some army units are marching through Britain's streets on multiple occasions. Earlier this month, The Rifles regiment exercised the Freedom of the Town of Wakefield, Yorkshire. They will do the same this month in Sherborne, Dorset, and again in Lyme Regis, as part of an event to commemorate the centenary of the ending of the First World War.

The Duke of Lancaster's regiment, having marched through Blackpool's city centre some months ago, visited three additional towns and cities this year. On June 30, soldiers carried out a 40 minute march through Preston, protected by armed police. On September 15, the regiment's 2nd Battalion participated in a 200-strong Battle of Britain parade through the centre of Barrow. Another march, this time through the town of Wyre, was announced for sometime this month.

The British people are being inured to the regular presence of the armed forces on the streets. In recent weeks, the crisis over Brexit has seen numerous warnings that such could be the economic tumult and "civil unrest" following the UK's formal exit from the European Union next March that plans are in place to put troops onto the streets.

The regular presence of serving soldiers in public spaces is intended both to glorify the military and intimidate the population. The ruling class is deeply concerned by the growth of anti-war sentiment and widespread revulsion at the actions of British imperialism around the world over the past 15 years, since the invasion of Iraq.

Armed Forces Day was established in 2009 by the Labour government of Gordon Brown to counteract this sentiment, replacing Veterans' Day, which had been observed since 2006. The parades and ceremonies are an attempt to create a bond between the population and "their" local regiments.

The aim is to assert the centrality of the military and its interests in British political life. The event in Inverness indicates that this purpose is to be pursued more aggressively in the future.

In conducting these parades, the armed forces have the full support of the whole spectrum of bourgeois political parties, not least the Labour Party. Barrow, Birmingham, Redcar, Stockton, Nuneaton, Preston, Warrington and Wakefield are all governed by majority-Labour councils, whose members hail the presence of the military on their streets.

Labour Councilor Karen Mundry, mayor of Warrington, said of the town's march: "The men and women of the 75 Engineers Regiment have long had a close association with Warrington. We were delighted to bestow upon them our highest honour by granting them the Freedom of the Borough in 2013."

She added, "We are very proud of the regiment and this is a fantastic opportunity to thank them for the work they do... I'd urge everyone to come along, show their support and see this magnificent regiment in all its glory."

The Labour leader of Wakefield Council, Peter Box, enthused: "It is a great honour to welcome the men and women of the Rifles Regiment, who are the largest regiment in the British Army. Please come along, welcome them to the city and celebrate our servicemen and women by lining the streets and enjoying the military displays."

Barry Longden, a Labour member in Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, described a planned march through Nuneaton as "a fantastic day out for all of the residents in the borough and further afield, so I hope we will all support this."

For all the talk of support and celebration, the truth is that the imperialist violence and banditry carried out by Britain's armed forces over the last two decades are widely opposed by the population. The spree of military parades reflects the deep concerns of the ruling elite over this opposition, which stands in the way of the militarist agenda shared by both main parties.

In recent years, the armed forces have intervened in political affairs in Britain in a manner unprecedented in modern history. Only a week after Jeremy Corbyn was first elected as Labour leader, Murdoch's *Sunday Times* reported the threat of a "mutiny" by a "senior serving general" in the event of his becoming prime minister. This was due to Corbyn's professed opposition to nuclear weapons and war.

Lord West, the former first sea lord and ex-Labour minister, declared that Corbyn "should not lead the nation." West warned that Corbyn's criticisms of militarism might get "the unthinking masses to vote for him."



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