



Fifty years ago this month, on 22 February 1972, Father Gerry Weston's life was ended by a car bomb. An Army Chaplain, he had just returned to barracks at Aldershot having been out to choose stained glass for a window in St Patrick's chapel, the camp's Catholic church.

The bomb, set by the IRA as a retaliation for the shooting of civilians in Derry by the Parachute Regiment, was intended for officers using the mess that lunchtime. As it happened, there were none present, but the explosion killed Father Weston and six others, a gardener and five women who worked at the officers' mess.

Father Weston was born in Waterloo and went to the parish school in Great Crosby before winning a scholarship to St Mary's College. He then studied for the priesthood at the seminary at St Joseph's, Upholland. Ordained in 1960 by Archbishop Heenan, his first appointment was to the parish of Holy Cross, St Helens, where he spent 12 weeks ministering at the town's Providence Hospital. His pastoral ministry continued for the next 6 years as assistant priest at St Benedict's, Hindley. While there he showed a great interest in youth work, organising outings for local children and forming the Cardinal Newman youth club. He was also a religious examiner for local schools and directed the church choir.

Perhaps the quiet life of a parish curate didn't entirely suit him: when Archbishop Beck offered him an Army Chaplaincy in February 1967 he was quick to accept. With the rank of Captain, he joined the 29th Armoured Brigade in Germany, and subsequently served in Aden. He had been a keen sportsman while at Upholland, a champion of the sack race on sports days as well as playing football, tennis and cricket. Luckily, he had remained fit into his 30s, as when he got the chance to join the Parachute Regiment he passed a gruelling training course that would have challenged many a younger man. Described by a fellow priest as 'a mad enthusiast', he developed a taste for freefall parachuting.

For four months in 1971 he was Chaplain to a battalion of the Parachute Regiment in Northern Ireland. Here, he attempted to form a bridgehead between Catholic and Protestant communities at the height of fighting between them. Despite threats to his life, he worked hard to improve relationships between British troops and Catholic families in the Ballymurphy and Turf Lodge districts of Belfast.

The commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment, Lt Col Geoffrey Howlett, remembered that 'He was a marvellous chaplain. He often went into the streets alone and unarmed trying to do his bit to improve relations with the local community.' It was for his efforts as a peacemaker that he was appointed an MBE, the announcement of which was made just a week before his death.

When he was buried in the churchyard at St Peter and St Paul's in Great Crosby (the church where he had been ordained) his coffin had a guard of honour from the Parachute Regiment and was covered in a Union Jack, surmounted by his parachutists' red beret alongside his chalice and stole as symbols of his priesthood.

At the time of his funeral, Norman Cresswell, the editor of the Catholic Pictorial, wrote that 'Hate is the most destructive barbarism the soul has to fight. And those who implant it bear a grave burden.' A memorial plaque to Father Weston was unveiled at St Mary's College in 2019.