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Speech delivered by Minister for Defence Mr. Willie O'Dea T.D. at the Commissioning Ceremony in Casement Aerodrome Baldonnel on the 15 Feb 2007

I am delighted to be back in Casement Aerodrome this afternoon on what is one of the most important occasions in the Air Corps' calendar. First of all, I want to offer my warmest congratulations to the five young men – 3 from the 25th Air Corps Cadet Class and 2 from the 82nd Army Cadet Class - who have just received their commissions. Today is a very special day for Andrew, Ger, Ross, Aidan and Odhran and their families.

This ceremony is testament to their commitment, dedication and, above all, hard work. It is a day when both they and their families can feel very proud of what they have achieved. A few moments ago these young officers took an Oath to the Irish State and its people. They have chosen a career of service to their country - a career for which courage, commitment and professionalism will be their guiding light. This Oath distinguishes them from others and it requires them to lead by example and display the highest standards at all times so they can motivate the others under their command to make the same commitment in the performance of their duty.

The five young men commissioned this afternoon are joining a Defence Forces that has changed enormously over the past decade. The investment in new aircraft, ships, infrastructure and equipment, combined with new approaches to human resources management and training have transformed the Defence Forces into a dynamic, modern, forward-looking organisation eager to play its part in modern Irish society and to promote Ireland's image overseas through its outstanding work in the area of Peacekeeping.

Over the last 10 years investment on modern equipment and services has topped more than €1.5 billion. This year's Defence Budget will exceed €1 billion for the first time in our history. This unprecedented investment in new equipment and infrastructure has had a positive impact on all areas of the Defence Forces. And the investment programme has not finished yet.

In the past 15 months, the Air Corps fleet has been augmented by the addition of two AB 139 utility helicopters and two EC135 light utility helicopters. A further two AB 139 utility helicopters will arrive later this year and the final pair are due to be delivered in 2008. These six new AW 139s provides the Air Corps with a very significant fleet and enables them to work in close co-operation with the Army in all facets of their operations.

In all, a total of 8 new helicopters have been purchased for the Air Corps at an overall cost of €86 million. The purchase of this hardware is further proof of the Government's commitment to ensure that all branches of the Defence Forces are fully equipped to carry out their day- to-day roles.

Of course as well as a bright future, the Irish Air Corps also has a distinguished past. Its origins lie in the Anglo-Irish Treaty talks of 1921 when a Martinsyde Mark II biplane was purchased to enable General Michael Collins to escape to Ireland should the talks fail. The aerodrome here at Baldonnel was first occupied by Irish troops in April 1922, and, by the close of 1922, the strength comprised ten aeroplanes and about forty personnel. I am very conscious of the Air Corp's proud past and of the desire of many aviation enthusiasts, military

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and civil alike to preserve as much of the Air Corps heritage as possible and I am delighted to announce today that I have given the go ahead to the purchase by my Department of an ex-Air Corps Avro 631 Cadet biplane. This aircraft was disposed of back in 1945 and is currently located in New Zealand where I understand that it has been restored to flying condition by a collector of old aircraft, Mr. Jim Schmidt who is keen to see it returned to its former home here in Baldonnel. GOC Air Corps will be visiting New Zealand shortly to examine the aircraft and finalise the arrangements for shipping it home to Ireland.

Earlier today the three new Air Corps officers were presented with their military pilot "Wings" in official recognition of their qualification as pilots. As cadets of the 25th Air Corps Class they were among the first to be trained on the new Pilatus PC 9M turbo prop trainer aircraft, eight of which were purchased in 2004 at a cost of €60 million. These new aircraft and the new Pilatus flight simulator means our cadet pilots are trained to the highest standards.

Since my appointment as Minister for Defence I have been keen to remove the perception of a "glass ceiling" to promotions in the Defence Forces. I believe that every recruit joining the Defence Forces should have a reasonable expectation of being promoted to commissioned officer level. The experience, talents and perspective that they bring will benefit the Defence Forces. In this regard, I am pleased to report that the arrangements for a Commissioning From The Ranks competition are almost complete. This competition will provide serving non-commissioned officers with an opportunity for promotion to the commissioned ranks.

We have introduced other changes designed to open the way for enlisted personnel to join the commissioned ranks. The 2005 cadetship competition was the first to implement the increase to the maximum entry age of 28 and to award bonus points to candidates with previous experience in the Permanent or Reserve Defence Force. Half of the 2005 cadet intake had previous service in either the Reserve or the PDF or, in some cases, both.

As I have said, this is an important day in the lives of these five young men. As officers of the Defence Forces you have chosen a very challenging and demanding career – but one that is also very fulfilling and rewarding. Foremost amongst these are the comradeship and the very high level of job satisfaction that comes from leading and serving others. I earnestly hope that you all will enjoy the many positive and enjoyable aspects of military life.

Before I conclude I'd like to compliment all of your instructors from the Military College and the Flying Training School. Without their patience, dedication and experience this event could not have taken place. Our thanks also go to everyone involved in the arrangements for this ceremony - particularly to the Army Band under the baton of Lt Brian Prendergast. Congratulations, one and all and I hope that you enjoy the rest of the day.

Thank you very much.

ENDS