

THE DEFENCE FORCES MAGAZINE

EST. 1940

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**FRONT COVER**

The new PC-12 aircraft  
Photographer Sgt Colum  
Lawlor, AC Photo Section,  
105 SQ

# EDITORIAL

**Hello, and welcome to our first issue of 2021, our 81st volume of the An Cosantóir magazine. Looking back at 2020, we can only hope that 2021 brings us all a fresh new start and we'd like to wish all our readers and supporters a happy new year.**

Our On Parade feature this month sees the Air Corps Fire Service training in the Bray fire training centre, Air Corps recruits being put through their paces in a battle PT's session, Merrion Square hosted a memorial attended by the Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Mark Mellett DSM and finally photographs from a Young Officers course which took place back in November.

With a new year comes new beginnings, and the first of these is a feature on military fitness, by Sgt Mick Lennon, his first instalment of the year is Acquiring Military Robustness pretty much explains itself, and is a good read for anyone looking to toughen themselves up.

Up next we have a bio piece on the ACOS, Brigadier General Adrian Ó Murchú, looking at his career in the Defence Forces right through to his appointment as ACOS. The ACOS pens his own piece on the work the DF has done in protecting itself and in turn the country in his piece called Protecting the Force.

We move on to an LTAV article by Capt Kevin Diffley, Kevin gives us an insight into what it takes to become LTAV qualified and more specifically the 29th LTAV Operator Drivers course.

Our centre spread this issue is brought to you by Capt Anthony Davey (AR Ret'd), his piece My experience of the Aer Lingus PPE Airlift from China, he tells us of the journey back and forth from where Covid-19 originated from and all the planning and preparation that went into such a mission.

Our front cover article is a piece about the newly purchased PC-12NG Spectre aircraft, purchased by the Air Corps last year, the process of which began back in 2017, these planes have already seen mission time in the air and will surely continue to do so for many years under the wing of Comdt Mick Barcoe OC 104 Sqn.

Moving on from aviation matters, our resident

journalist, Tony O'Brien, had the opportunity to speak with Lt Col Fred O'Donovan, OC 117th Inf Bn UNIFIL. Fred spoke of the training his troops underwent and what life was initially like in the mission area. An Cosantóir would like to wish the 117th Inf Bn good luck on the remaining months of their mission.

SCPO Ruairí de Barra continues his piece in Part 2 of Fleet Support Group, with his insight into the workings of an active Naval Fleet Support group. We look forward to Ruairí's next instalment from a Naval perspective in the March edition of An Cosantóir.

Our People of the Defence Forces feature is split into two, with a piece from Gnr Robbie McCarthy and A/m Billy Doyle. Dirty Boots (Previously the Tac-Aide feature) continues with our hillwalking serious and sees the climb of Carrauntoohil via the Devils Ladder. Choose your suffering by Cpl Martin Bennett, looks at the adventure sports undertaken by Capt Gearoid O'Briain of the Air Corps. And our final piece and new addition is our mental health series, Headspace & Timing, provided by PSS, this feature will address the mental health issues faced by the Defence Forces and give you invaluable information on how to address those issues you may be facing.

Our Curragh Pens competition continues this month which is running for a limited time and could see you win 1 of 5 unique handcrafted pens kindly provided to us by Bill Dooley of Curragh Pens, see page 4 for further details.

Many thanks to all our contributors, and we hope to continue producing the magazine through 2021 that we know you've enjoyed through the years.

**«Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.»**

**– Winston S. Churchill**

**Sgt Karl Byrne – (Stand-in) Editor.**

# NOTICEBOARD

## PARENTAL LEAVE FOR SERVING MEMBERS OF THE IRISH DEFENCE FORCES

The key provisions of the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019 are as follows:

- Each relevant parent is entitled to 2 weeks paid parent's leave for a child born or, in the case of adoption, placed on or after 1 November 2019.
- Parent's Leave can be taken in a continuous period of two weeks or in separate blocks of one week each.
- Parent's Leave can be availed of from the date of the birth/placement date up to 52 weeks after this date.<sup>1</sup>
- It is a requirement of the Act that applications are submitted in time to reach Pay Admin Section, Finance Br, DOD, at least 6 weeks in advance setting out the expected date on which the leave will begin and the duration of the planned leave (this is to facilitate not only unit staff planning but also for cessation of pay).
- Parent's Leave cannot be transferred between parents other than in specified circumstances such as the death of a parent.
- All DF members are entitled to protection from penalisation, including dismissal, unfair treatment for exercising their entitlement to Parent's Leave. Any DF member availing of the leave has an entitlement to return to his/her normal military employment in the same location and to the same terms and conditions of employment before they commenced the Parent's Leave.

Pay Admin Section, Finance Br, DOD with at least six weeks' notice, will make the necessary arrangements for pay to be stopped for the period of the leave.

Applications for Parent's Benefit can be made online at [mywelfare.ie](http://mywelfare.ie).

(<https://services.mywelfare.ie/en/topics/parents-childrenfamily/>). If an individual is unable to apply online, postal applications are also accepted. A Parent's Benefit application form can be requested by emailing or phoning the Parent's Benefit Section, DSP (Department of Social Protection).

When submitting an application for Parent's Benefit, the applicant must declare that their Parent's Leave has been approved by their employer. DSP may contact an employer (Pay Admin Section, Finance Br, DOD) asking them to confirm the dates of Parent's Leave.

<sup>1</sup> The Act provides for the commencement date of Parent's Leave where a relevant parent is entitled to Maternity Leave (inc. extended Maternity Leave), Adoptive Leave and transferred Paternity Leave

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Last month's winner of the PROTAC €50 Voucher is ??. Closing date is 16th Apr 2021.

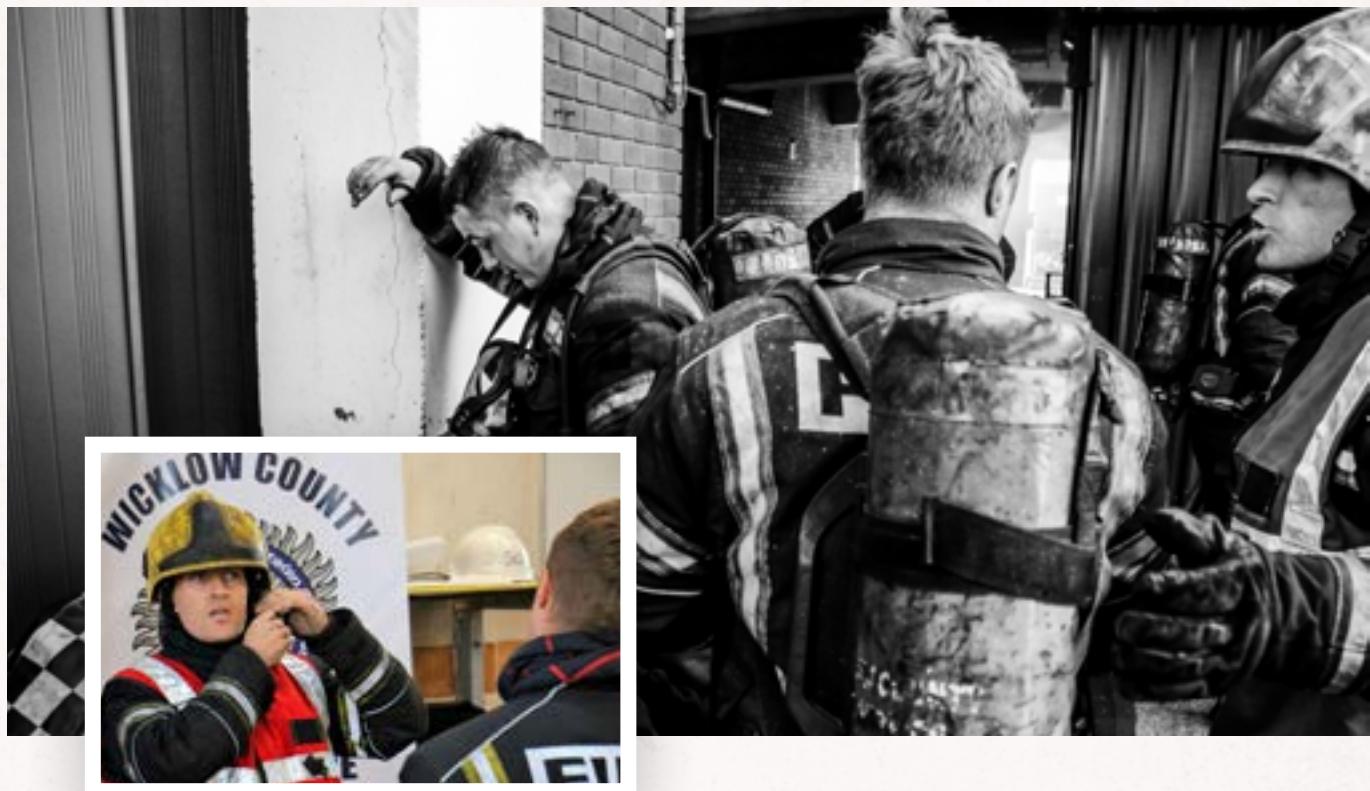
# ON PARADE

January  
February

2021

## Air Corps Fire Service

Photos by Mark Pollock



Members of the Air Corps Fire Service partake in Crash rescue training at the Bray Fire Training Centre. This type of training is essential to keep the fire fighters up to speed on modern practices being used in the fire service today.



# Baldonnel Aerodrome

Photos by Mark Pollock

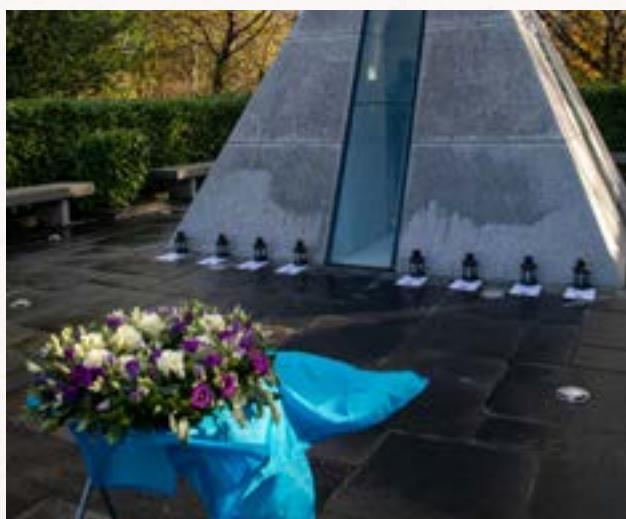


Air Corps recruits are put through a battle pt's session by Air Corps physical training instructors on the grounds of Baldonnel aerodrome.



# Irish Defence Memorial

Photos by A/M Sam Gibney

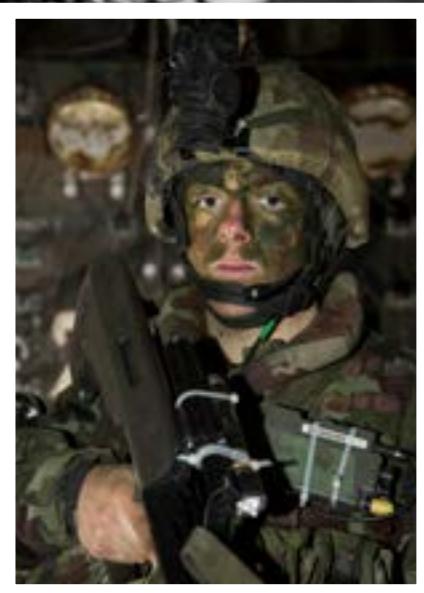


The Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Mark Mellett DSM lays a wreath in honour of those who lost their lives whilst serving for the Irish Defence Forces. The ceremony took place at the Irish Defence Memorial, Merrion Square, Dublin on the 18th November 2020.



# 1 BTC FIBUA

Photos by A/M Sam Gibney



A young officers course exercise is conducted in Fort Davis and Semple Stadium in Thurles back in early November. The students first assaulted and took over the area in and around Semple Stadium and then in the early hours a few days later the students stormed Fort Davis via RHIB's attacking the complex room by room building by building.





Troops on 2 - 3 star course taking part in MOUT training in Fort Davis

# ACQUIRING PHYSICAL ROBUSTNESS

Sgt Michael Lennon

Most of us by now will have seen the Defence Forces Infantry Ethos, which outlines a number of infantry soldier principles. There is one in particular that stands out for me, as a physical training instructor in the infantry.

This is: • **Acquire physical robustness and mental resilience.**

I'd like to focus, in this article, on the physical robustness part of this principle. So, what is physical robustness, and how might one acquire it?

The word robust comes from the latin robustus, meaning of Oak, hard or strong. Robustness is defined as the quality or condition of being strong or in good condition; the ability to withstand or overcome adverse conditions or rigorous testing. Ukrantseva et al (2016) define physical robustness as the ability to resist a deviation from the normal physical state and avoid an adverse health event. For many of us in the Defence Forces this deviation from the normal physical state comes in the form of a musculoskeletal injury suffered while training or going about our various daily tasks.

I attended a presentation in 2019, given by the Defence Forces association of physiotherapists, which stated that the most common area where injury or pain occurs in people attending DF physiotherapists in the previous two years, was in the lumbar/lower back region, 20% in fact. The second most common at 14%, was the knee.

Many of us also have to, throughout our military careers, withstand or overcome some fairly adverse conditions and rigorous testing. Let's compare military training and operations to sport: Athletes participating in any sport, at all levels, will have some form of training programme that either they, or a strength and conditioning coach will have designed. Sport, particularly field sports, can be quite chaotic, so the athlete is exposed to varying degrees of risk while taking part. In order for that athlete to perform efficiently, and avoid (or at least greatly reduce) the risk of injury, their training programme will hopefully have suitably conditioned their body for the demands of their chosen sport.

## References:

Boyle, M., Advances in functional training. Training techniques for coaches, personal trainers, and athletes. On Target publications 2010.

Ukrantseva, S., Yashin, A.I., Arbeev, K.G., Resilience versus robustness in aging. The Journals of Gerontology: Series A, Volume 71, Issue 11, P. 1533-34, November 2016.



Equipment set up for circuit training

If we look at military training in the same way, when we participate in training or operations - we throw on our body armour (approximately 9kg), helmet, battle vest and daysack, usually with 35lbs plus of gear inside, and we start moving, while carrying our Steyr or G.P.M.G., or even heavier and more awkward weapons systems (the 84mm Anti-Tank gun immediately comes to mind) - we become the athlete: A tactical athlete.

What are the demands that are placed upon this tactical athlete? Well usually we'll have to move a certain distance, on foot, while carrying all the equipment mentioned above, and more if carrying CEMO. We may suddenly, while patrolling at a fairly steady pace, have to fire, DASH, DOWN, cover, CRAWL and so on. This will more often than not result in an extended period of organised (or perhaps not so organised) chaos in the form of a contact drill, or a section or platoon in attack, which will require lots more sprinting and crawling. We may have to climb over walls, up ladders, through windows, and a whole host of other tasks which expose us to a greater risk of injury.

We may have to carry a heavy casevac or resupply for an extended period. All of the aforementioned activities will entail varying amounts of sprinting, deceleration, reacceleration, changing direction, crawling, carrying, dragging, getting into and out of awkward uncomfortable positions etc. We will definitely have to take multiple knees, and then return to an upright position with all the added external load. We all know or maybe have been that person



Trained soldiers taking part in a casevac & ammo resupply drill

who has to almost drag their buddy to the ground while using them as a lever to get themselves up off one knee.

So how can the tactical athlete condition their body for the demands of these chaotic activities? Quite similar to how any athlete trains, with a few extras such as battle P.T., military circuits, route marches etc.

When I am designing a training programme, I look at the body using the joint by joint approach developed by strength and conditioning coach Mike Boyle and physiotherapist Gray Cook. The joints alternate from a primary function of mobility to stability (Boyle 2010).

- Ankle: mobility.
- Knee: stability.
- Hip: mobility in multiple planes.
- Lumbar spine (core): stability.
- Thoracic spine: mobility.
- Shoulder: mobility & stability.

If the required mobility or stability is inadequate at a particular joint, this may lead to issues at the joint or joints above or below, due to compensation.

Mobility can be improved or maintained during any warm-up by including mobility stations in a circuit, in stand-alone sessions such as Yoga or Pilates, or as a form of active rest in between working sets in a resistance training session.



Troops on 2 - 3 star course on a route march



Marching out from the Fort Davis top level

Stability can be improved or maintained in a variety of ways also:

- **Plyometrics:** Jumps (both legs), hops (taking off and landing on same leg), and bounds (from one leg to the other), with emphasis on technique and landing mechanics initially.
- **Sprinting:** Progressively introducing sprinting, (both uphill and on flat ground), to your own training will greatly reduce the risk of a hamstring injury when you suddenly have to move into top gear for any number of reasons.
- **High-speed running:** extensive to intensive tempo running.
- **Change of direction drills:** Accelerate, decelerate, reaccelerate.

• **Resistance training:** Using bodyweight, Pilates, resistance bands, medicine balls, power-bags, kettlebells, suspension trainers, free weights, or a combination of all of the above.

Any resistance training workout or programme should include a balanced amount of:

**a) Explosive exercises:** Jumps, Med ball throws or slams, swings, cleans or snatches.

**b) Knee dominant:** Squat progressions, split squats, lunges, lateral squats or lunges, single leg squats.



Troops on 2 - 3 star course marching across the top level of Fort Davis after a morning of MOUT training

**c) Hip dominant: (Hip Extension)** Bridges, hip hinge, hip thrusts, deadlift variations, single leg deadlift variations.

**(Knee Flexion):** Supine leg curl variations, Nordics.

**d) Push: (Vertical)** Overhead pressing, **(Horizontal)** push-up variations, flat and incline dumbbell and barbell bench presses.

**e) Pull: (Vertical)** Pull-ups, chin-ups, band pulldowns, lat pulldowns. **(Horizontal)** rows, single arm rows, band pull-aparts, horizontal chins (inverted rows).

**f) Core: (Anti Extension)** Plank variations, body-saws, dead-bugs, crawl variations. **(Anti lateral Flexion)** side plank progressions, and **(Anti Rotation)** planks with arm or leg lifts, shoulder taps, shoulder tap and flye, Renegade rows, Palloff press.

**g) Weighted carries:** Farmers carry, suitcase carry, rack carry, overhead, mixed.

(These will help keep you upright and your arm in its socket, the next time you have to carry your buddy, or heavy, awkward equipment for an unspecified time or distance over difficult terrain).

**h) Prehab:** Hip abduction & extension, band walks, Internal and external rotation, face pulls, IYTW.

Of course, sometimes injury can be unavoidable, however, time well spent in or out of the gym, with smart structured training, combined with implementation of progressive overload and adequate recovery and nutrition will greatly improve performance and efficiency while participating in chaotic high intensity activities with external load, and also help reduce the likelihood of injury.

Physical activity. Mobility. Stability. INVINCIBILITY?

Well, a degree of physical robustness at least.



# BRIGADIER GENERAL ADRIAN Ó MURCHÚ, ASSISTANT CHIEF OF STAFF (ACOS)

Brigadier General Adrian Ó Murchú

In conversation with Sgt  
Karl Byrne  
Photos by A/M Sam Gibney

My career in the PDF began back in 1982 as a member of the 59th Cadet Class. Prior to this, I had served with the 22nd Inf Bn FCA in my home town of Ennis. After my commissioning, my initial appointments were with the 6th Inf Bn, the Army Ranger Wing and Military Intelligence, before moving to the Infantry School as an instructor. Later appointments included Company Commander and Second in Command in the 5th Inf Bn, Chief Instructor of the Cadet School, Head of European Security Section in Ops in DFHQ, Commandant of the UN Training School Ireland and CO of the Central Medical Unit. Before promotion to ACOS, my most recent appointment was Director of Strategic Planning, in which role I also acted as Senior Staff Officer to the Chief of Staff.

To be promoted to the rank of Brigadier General and the position of ACOS in February 2020 was a matter of great pride for me, as soldiering was the Murphy family trade. My late father Christy served as an NCO before and during the Emergency (WWII), mostly in An Chéad Cathlán Coisithe in Galway. Several of his brothers also served in the DF and the British Army. My grandfather served as an NCO in the 1st Bn Royal Munster Fusiliers and was wounded in Gallipoli during WWI, while his brother in law (my granduncle) was sadly killed in France while serving with the 1st Bn Irish Guards. Having that family history behind me, I consider myself honoured to be given this

appointment. In many ways, each of my appointments at the tactical, operational and strategic levels up to this point has prepared me for this role, as has working with magnificent teams of Irish personnel both at home and abroad. Some of my best memories are from my overseas service, which includes tours of duty in UNIFIL, UNOSOM II (Somalia), MINURSO (Western Sahara), UNTSO (Israel) and ONUCI (Ivory Coast). I also deployed twice with the EU, as Chief Intelligence Analyst with the Force HQ in Chad and more recently for two years in Brussels as Military Assistant to the Chairman of the EU Military Committee.

Apart altogether from Covid (see separate article 'Protecting the Force'), the world around us is changing at a remarkable rate. During my time as ACOS, I will do my best to ensure that the DF continues to evolve and improve to reflect the world outside the barrack gate - not only to counter the threats we face, but to take advantage of the opportunities that are available, for example in training and education. Under the leadership of Training and Education Branch (DJ7) and the DFTC, we have never had as many personnel studying in third level institutions all over the country, and our in-house courses are second to none, a fact acknowledged by foreign students and assessors. In fact, some time ago the Secretary General of the Department of Education said that the DF were



Brigadier General Adrian Ó Murchú Assistant Chief of Staff addressing members of Post 1 IUNVA, Dublin

the exemplars of lifelong learning in the entire Public Sector.

For my part, I have been very lucky that the DF has facilitated my continuous training and education over the last 38 years. I studied French and English literature in NUIG in the 1980s, did a year in the French War College in 2001 and later completed a Masters in International Liaison and Communication at the University of Westminster in my own time. In 2018, I underwent an Executive Diploma in Strategy and Innovation at the Smurfit Business School (UCD). Apart from various military qualifications, I hold a NATO interpreter's qualification in French and have a keen interest in Irish language and music (le linn an ama atá fágtha agam sa tseirbhís, ba mhaith liom níos mó ama a chaitheamh ag feabhsú mo Ghaeilge). I also hold instructor qualifications as a diver and parachutist (both military and sport), and I am honoured to be the President of Defence Forces Parachuting.

But it's not only in the training environment that we are excelling – DF personnel have consistently performed at an extremely high level when tested against any national or international standard. I have been lucky to spend a lot of time overseas, both on missions and on training, and I can safely say that our people, both serving and retired, are as good as anybody out there in the military or civilian spheres, and in many cases better. I am certain that just as the previous generations have proven themselves, and as this generation has done once again during Covid, the next generation of inductees has a huge amount to offer, and I am very optimistic for the future of the Defence Forces.

It is fair to say that as an organisation we are not perfect - there are always things that we can do better. But as long as our values are right and we continue to learn from our mistakes, then the Defence Forces will always be a world class military organisation, of which we can be very proud. That is one of the reasons why we are spending so much time and effort rolling out our 'Values in Action' programme, in partnership with our senior enlisted leaders. A look at the stories behind our 'Values Champions' in recent years is certainly uplifting, and there are many more untold stories and unsung heroes where they came from, especially during Covid.

That said, I would like our personnel reading this to know that we in the General Staff are very aware of the pressures and challenges that our soldiers, sailors, aircrew and their families have been experiencing in recent years. We are aware because we are listening – to your commanders, to your representative association leaders and to you. We will continue to work night and day to do all in our power to address those pressures and challenges. For my part, I will never stop both working and advocating for the soldiers, sailors and aircrew of Óglaigh na hÉireann, both Permanent and Reserve, so that we can make the Defence Forces the very best it can be – for you, for the State and above all for our citizens.

# PROTECTING THE FORCE

By ACOS Brigadier General Adrian Ó MURCHÚ  
Photos provided by the office of the ACOS

## The Defence Forces Approach to Force Protection and Business Continuity during Covid-19

Since the outbreak of the pandemic last March, the DF have taken a twin-track approach to Covid-19. Simply described, this approach consisted of an 'up & out' track and an 'in & down' track. The first track was led by Brig Gen Brian Cleary<sup>1</sup>, then Commander of the Joint Task Force (JTF) for 'Operation Fortitude', which was launched to support the national effort against COVID-19, in other words all our outputs. The second track was led by me as Assistant Chief of Staff (ACOS), in my role as DF Risk Manager. This track focused on force protection and business continuity, and was managed by the Joint Operational Planning Group<sup>2</sup> (JOPG) on 'Living with COVID-19', which I chair. This article focuses on that second track – 'Protecting the Force'.

In many ways, protecting the force through Covid poses many of the same challenges as night operations - it's hard to locate the 'enemy', command and control is more difficult and if things go wrong, they can go very wrong, very quickly. That's why we use three good rules of thumb for night ops: you need to develop a clear plan, communicate that plan down to the lowest level (and repeat!), and you must ensure strong leadership and command presence on the ground. These three rules of thumb guided our approach to protecting our centre of gravity - the health, safety and wellbeing of our personnel.

## Develop a Clear Plan



Our plan was developed under three headings, the first and most pressing of which was **Health, Safety and Wellbeing**. We needed to enforce national guidelines but go further, establishing countermeasures relevant to and required by a military force. The necessary details were captured in a series of Covid response directives and guidance documents, issued

<sup>1</sup> Brig Gen Cleary has recently been appointed as GOC 1st Brigade.

<sup>2</sup> JOPG members included the Risk Managers (i.e. deputies) of each formation and branch, along with relevant subject matter experts. The JOPG was organised into four syndicates (HR, Operations, Training and JTF) and met roughly every fortnight and ahead of each national transition.

by me as DF Risk Manager. For example, one document covered PPE, decontamination and cleaning procedures. Great credit is due to our subject matter experts who led the development of these documents, for example in the areas of Health & Safety (H&S), medical policy and service delivery, Engineering, Ordnance etc., who reflected the wealth of talent, education and experience across all ranks of the Defence Forces.

The second area where we needed a clear plan was on how we could **Train and Educate in a Covid Environment**. While we did significantly reduce non-essential training, we did have to continue to train inductees, prepare for overseas and conduct priority training such as in medical service delivery. To this end a detailed Training Instruction was issued by the Director of Training & Education and regularly updated (Version 4 is being finalised as I write). Our medical personnel once again did Trojan work in support of that training plan, for example providing both the necessary medical training and occupational medicals.

The third component of our plan was our **Business Continuity Plan**. This ensured compliance with national and Public Service guidelines, and covered such areas as leave, hot desking and remote working. This was done by means of a formal General Routine Order, issued by Deputy Chief of Staff (Support). DJ1 made sure to update the text each time national guidelines evolved, and we're now on our 5th iteration of this GRO.

## Communicate that Plan



COS Visit to musician contact tracing

The second rule of thumb was to communicate that plan, over and over, down to the lowest level. We did this in three ways, the first of which was **Through the Chain of Command**. Strategic Planning Branch issued regular General Staff directions and planning updates to all stations. Again, great credit is due to all the members of the JOPG who prepared

these directives for General Staff approval. To complement our commanders 'Talks to Troops' etc., we developed a detailed PowerPoint presentation on Covid Risk Awareness with associated speaking notes, and our H&S network delivered it to all ranks in a formal manner. Receipt of the presentation is certified on our training management system, so that we can track and prove progress. As I write about 95% of our personnel have been briefed and certified, and we will start over again in the New Year. This was only one example of the exceptional work done by our Health & Safety network, led by Comdt Conor Ryan in DFHQ and the formation safety reps, who played a blinder throughout.

The second way that we communicated our plan was through **Extensive Use of All the Channels Available** to our Public Relations Branch, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp. Our audio-visual team developed short videos, for example a clip featuring the Chief of Staff directly addressing all ranks and their families, which was shared on all channels.

But nothing beats **Face To Face Contact**. Over a number of weeks, I led a small Covid Assurance Team on visits to every DF installation. The team included EO Training Branch, the DFHQ H&S Officer and the DF Sgt Major. These short visits provided assurance in both directions. The visiting team confirmed that there was both clarity on the plan and compliance with all our countermeasures. Units for their part got the chance to give feedback and raise concerns, which were fed back into improving and guidance documents, via the JOPG.

## Strong Leadership



ACOS Covid Assurance Visit to the Aviva

As ever, the glue that holds it all together in the Military, and our third and final rule of thumb, is Leadership. First and foremost, this meant a **Strong Command Presence** by all leaders, from our junior NCOs up to and including formation commanders and General Staff members, so that our leaders were visible on the front line, talking and especially listening to our people. In this regard the leadership shown by our NCOs was superb, and in keeping with the finest traditions of Óglaigh na hÉireann.

We also placed great emphasis on **Encouraging and Enabling Innovation**. Pte Tommy Collins, our tailor in Collins Barracks Cork, produced an excellent DPM (camouflage) facemask, while we were procuring 30,000 facemasks from industry (our Army cadets were later able to use these DPM facemasks during their tactical training). Sgt Leona Houlihan volunteered NOT to travel overseas as scheduled so that she could establish an in-house Covid testing facility in St Brin's. This type of innovation and selflessness was repeated again and again throughout the year, across all services and ranks.

This leads me to my final point on Leadership: the need to **Recognise Leadership and Exemplars of Our DF Values**. In the DF we do this through our Values Champions Awards, a key component of our 'Values in Action' Programme. Anyone can be nominated, including PDF, RDF and civilian employees. Likewise anyone can nominate a comrade for an award, regardless of rank or station. I'm pleased to report that as I write, we have over 90 nominations in for this year. Our selection panel of senior enlisted leaders (Sgts Major and equivalent) will have a tough job picking the champions this year!

## The Result



Com JTF & ACOS addressing a recent Covid lessons learned webinar

I'm glad to report that this DF twin track approach has worked. So while we have continued to conduct framework operations at home and abroad, carried out essential training and education and, most importantly, continued to deploy our personnel in support of the HSE and others throughout the pandemic, our latest analysis confirms that our infection rates in the DF match the national rates per head of population, almost exactly.

The majority of the personnel who have tested positive in the DF are assessed to have picked up the virus in the community and not at work, even though we have continued to work throughout the pandemic. And that, I hope, is the real proof that our three 'rules of thumb' have seen us safely this far through this crisis. Until the vaccine is fully rolled out (and it may take some time), we need to keep practicing our good drills, such as our hand washing/sanitising, cough etiquette and social distancing. In that way, we will keep our infection rates low and continue to successfully protect our centre of gravity through 2021.



29th Operator Drivers Course group photo

# LTAV ODC

The 6 Infantry Battalion is the home of the Light Tactical Armoured Vehicle (LTAV) School of Excellence, which came into operation in 2010 alongside the induction of LTAVs into the Defence Forces. The LTAV has since become an important strategic asset of the Defence Forces and is operationally utilized both on island and particularly on our two main troop contributing overseas missions in UNDOF and UNIFIL.

The LTAV is a 4x4 multi-purpose mine-protected armoured personnel carrier, which is smaller and easier to navigate than the MOWAG armoured vehicle. The Defence Forces currently use the platform for operational patrolling and as part of the Quick Reaction Forces in both UNDOF and UNIFIL; providing increased mobility, firepower and protection.

The 6 Inf Bn LTAV Infantry School of Excellence run between five and eight LTAV courses annually, in order to qualify personnel to operate these vehicles, both at home and overseas, as well as up-skilling our own personnel in the gunnery and driving in order to continually increase our operator and instructor pools. These courses include Gunnery Dismount Course (GDC), Operator Drivers Course (ODC), Fitters Admin Drivers Course (FADC) and Instructors Course. The LTAV courses which we run are a vital cog in ensuring that there are enough personnel qualified to fill the overseas vacancies. In late 2020, the 6 Inf Bn ran an Operator Drivers Course (ODC), which is a four week course to qualify Defence Forces personnel in the driving, operational and gunnery skills associated with the Infantry LTAV. The 29th LTAV ODC had twelve students, six of whom deployed with the 117 Infantry

By Capt Kevin Diffley

Photos provided by Capt Kevin Diffley



3 LTAV's lined up on display on the range before a shoot



An LTAV hidden in behind a deployed smoke screen

Battalion to Lebanon as part of the UNIFIL mission, and proved to be a key enabler to qualify the required personnel for this mission.

As mentioned, the LTAV ODC is a four week course which encapsulates elements of driving (on and off road), gunnery, tactical awareness and maintenance skills associated with the LTAV. This course consisted of twelve students from five different units across the entire Defence Forces. This is a thoroughly enjoyable, yet intense course and consists of classroom-based lectures, practical lessons, driving instruction, vehicle maintenance and gunnery training. The students, on completion of the course will be sufficient in:



An LTAV is seen in the distance on the Lateral road in the Glen of Imaal



An LTAV overlooking the range in the Glen of Imaal

the driving of the LTAV RG 32M in all weather conditions, operating the vehicle in a CBRN environment, conducting vehicle maintenance, safely conducting recovery operations, and confident in deploying in a tactical environment. The students will also be up skilled on and fire the MAG58 and 66mm smoke discharge system during the course qualifying shoot.

The first two weeks of the course comprise of classroom and practical based lectures to gain an appreciation and understanding of the workings of the Light Tactical Armoured Vehicle. While the students also begin driver training, which is progressively introduced, that consists of extended periods of driving in both rural and urban areas, supplemented by practical lessons on vehicle recovery and maintenance. This tends to be a difficult transition for students who have to quickly adapt to a vehicle which differs greatly from anything they have qualified in thus far.



An LTAV and its crew carrying out a range practice in the Glen of Imaal

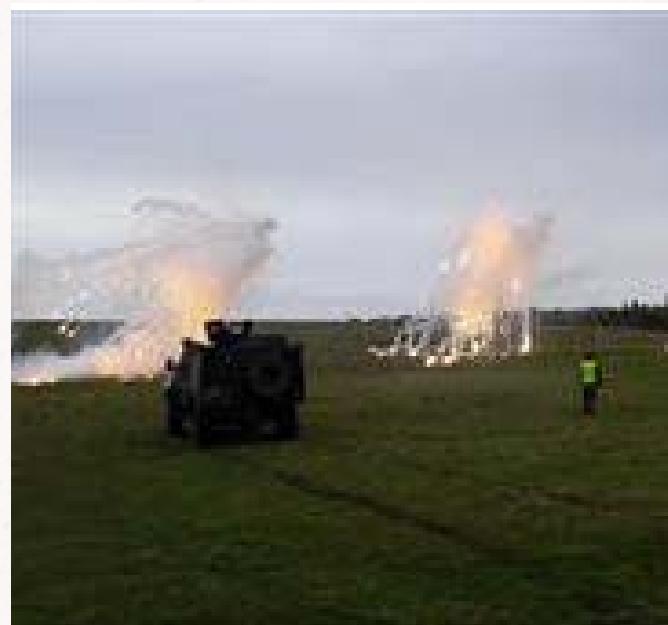


An LTAV gunner firing the mounted 7.62 GMPG on a conventional rifle range as part of their range practices

The LTAV is a nine-ton vehicle with a 17-meter turning circle and needs to be cautiously manoeuvred by the vehicle operator, in order drive it in a safe and competent manner. To operate the vehicle correctly, the driver also needs to be aware and in full knowledge of the many systems incorporated into the LTAV. These include a central tyre inflation system, which enables the vehicle to navigate varying terrain, an onboard CBRN protection and ventilation system, and multiple communication suites including a Harris

HF radio, Sincgar VHF Radio and a Motorola radio for in-car and car-to-car communication.

Weeks three and four are ultimately seen as the assessment weeks, with the on and off-road testing of the students. The Cavalry School DFTC facilitate this testing for us, with the on-road test taking place in the greater DFTC area and



Members of the course under supervision deploy smoke grenades from the LTAV's

the off-road testing on the cross country driving course in Coolmoney Camp. During week three the students also undertake night driving in the Defence Forces training area at Carnagh Ranges in Athlone, utilizing night vision equipment.

Then finally in week four we conduct our tactical exercise and shoot. We vary this between the Slieve Bloom Mountains, Co Offaly and the Glen of Imaal training area for our tactical training exercise, with both areas very accommodating and ideal locations. During the 29th LTAV ODC we conducted our shoot and tactical exercise in the Glen of Imaal over a two day period, incorporating a tactical movement shoot on the Anti-Armour Range - which proved to be very popular and successful - then moving back to the camp training areas for the tactical aspect.

Overall, the 29th LTAV ODC proved to a very enjoyable and successful course, and provided five students with the qualifications and training to deploy overseas with the 117 Inf Bn to UNIFIL. We wish them a safe and rewarding mission, whilst also hoping we see a number of the NCO students from this course back to 6 Inf Bn in the near future to complete an LTAV Instructor course.

The 6 Inf Bn would like to thank all units who continue to support our Infantry LTAV training and encourage personnel from all units to consider completing these courses to up skill and open further opportunities for themselves in future.



# MY EXPERIENCE OF THE AER LINGUS PPE AIRLIFT FROM CHINA

Being able to help out with Ireland's battle against the COVID-19 pandemic is something I was fortunate to do in my job as a Captain with Aer Lingus.

My connection with the military was through the RDF/FCA and my last appointment there was Captain adjutant with 62 Cav Sqn RDF in Cathal Brugha Barracks. I am a commander on our A330 aircraft and back in early 2020 operated direct flights to Beijing PRC, returning to Dublin with consignments of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for our frontline medical personnel.

The operation began on Saturday 28th March, and over three months some 259 round trips were operated, amounting to almost 2.7m miles travelled by the A330 fleet on the route. The services transported 4,000 tonnes of cargo - made up of some 86m individual pieces of PPE - with up to five flights operating daily. The final flight arrived into Dublin Airport on Friday 26th June.

Planning this operation, from its inception to take-off of the first flight, took a little over three days and entailed an extraordinary amount of communication. Every department of the airline was called upon and most operated for 24 hours each day during that period. Here I must compliment His Excellency the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China and the personnel at the Embassy of the PRC for their engagement and assistance, without which this could not have happened. Also, and at very short notice, the officials at the Embassy set up a most expeditious visa processing operation for the Aer Lingus pilots, engineers and loadmasters.

Our Flight Operations Department provided suitably qualified pilots (crews of five) while specialist flight planners and performance engineers organising route and airspace options came through Flight Ops Support, along with clearances to enter the PRC plus the data for the destination airfield and the en-route and destination alternate aerodromes.

Members of the DFTC 1 MIC unit loading PPE from China onto the DROPS containers

By Capt Anthony Davey  
(AR Ret'd)  
Photos by A/M Sam Gibney

The Engineering Department provided engineers (2 per aircraft) and logistical support for maintenance issues; IAG Cargo Dublin gave us loadmasters (2 per aircraft) to supervise the weight distribution and load security at Beijing while Flight Kitchens Department looked after our food. In-Flight Services provided the special crew declarations and health-check documents.

The airline's Finance Department, Corporate Security and Legal Office were involved in the planning, as was the Head Office at Shamrock House. The Aer Lingus Appearance Teams undertook a deep cleaning and sanitising regime on each aircraft after unloading and again prior to the aircraft re-entering service.



Defence Forces Scania trucks loading PPE into their containers



An Garda Siochana escorts the Defence Forces vehicles carrying the PPE from Dublin Airport

The route from Dublin took us north of the Isle of Man towards Cumbria and east towards Sunderland, across the North Sea to Jutland and eastwards to Malmo; across the Baltic Sea over Parnu Estonia and then towards St Petersburg. Most of the time flying out and back was spent over Russia and indeed it is a very big country.

We flew over a large portion of Siberia, a vast underpopulated area yet quite beautiful with some areas resembling the European Alps. An example of the 'big country' is the flood plain of the river Ob as it flows west and then north from the city of Khanty-Mansiysk. The outer width of the river is similar in distance from Dublin to Galway. In the region to the west of the Ural Mountains, large areas are covered in a network of pipelines and roads associated with gas and oil exploration. The northern Ural Mountains are a defining feature of a global east-west borderline while the Western Altai Mountains mark



Capt Anthony Davey (AR Retd) sitting in the cockpit of the Aer Lingus plane St Laurence O'Toole

another boundary, this time between Siberia and Mongolia.

Beijing Capital Airport is the largest airport at which I have landed. It is to the east of the city and has three north-south parallel runways. Because of the somewhat intricate layout

of the taxiway structure, getting the aircraft to the designated ramp for loading was a challenge in itself.

Each aircraft flew east-bound almost empty and returned with every possible area of the aircraft packed with the PPE and, while these were very lightweight commodities, the payload varied between 14 and 25 metric tonnes. For these flights, the passenger seating in the cabin area was specially adapted to contain large packs of PPE. The boxes are wrapped in an

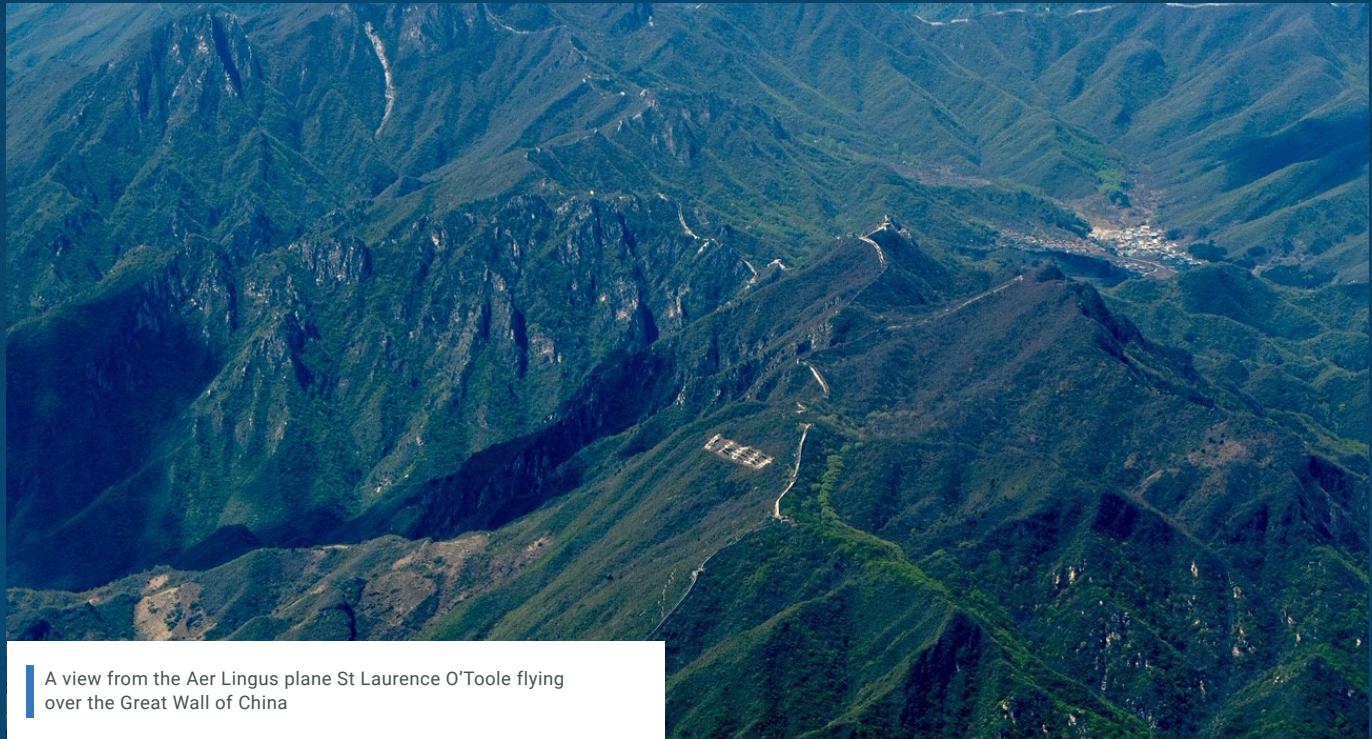


Captain Anthony Davey poses for a photo in Beijing airport beside the Aer Lingus plane he flew home

outer packaging and were tension-strapped to the seat-row anchor points. It is quite unusual to see an airliner configured like this.

The loading process at Beijing Capital Airport PEK (ZBAA) was interesting in itself insofar as it involved two distinct loading teams. The main cargo bays, cargo holds 1,2,3 and 4 were loaded using large hydraulic mobile lifting platforms while cargo hold 5 and the main cabin compartments were loaded by hand, using well-rehearsed teams working in chain and utilising mobile conveyor belts angled upwards to the door platforms.

Climbing out of Beijing we crossed the Great Wall and on



A view from the Aer Lingus plane St Laurence O'Toole flying over the Great Wall of China

the port side of the aircraft, embedded into the hillside, a noticeable patriotic slogan in Mandarin proclaims: "Be loyal to Chairman Mao". From this point to the eastern border with Mongolia the topography is very similar to that of Spain's interior. Approaching the border with Mongolia we were flying over high desert with great expanses of dusty plains between the few towns en-route.

Ulaanbataar, that nation's capital, is sited in a green valley between two mountain outcrops. The airport there has a south-east facing runway with an unusually steep up-slope.

Continuing westwards as we flew over the Altai mountain range again, this time towards Siberia, the tiredness factor became more noticeable and over the following five hours there were quite a few changes of the operating pilots. There was a short but formal handover of command of the aircraft from Commander B to the Relief Commander, and later on to Commander A. Having rested, Commander B then resumed his position for the remainder of the flight. Despite our familiarity with each other, clear articulation of operating responsibility, roles and rest periods were essential.

A physiological pleasantry of these flights was that, if I needed to exercise cramped muscles after say 6 or 8 hours in the cockpit, I handed over control and went for a walk taking in the full length of the aircraft. This is quite a novelty because on a regular passenger flight there are security implications against such a stroll around the cabin.

The return journey initially re-traced the outward flight westwards as far as Ulaanbataar but from there until the

east of Scotland we flew a much more northerly route. There are two reasons for this: going to China, the Russian authorities allocated a specific entry point to their airspace for our flights and this was south of St Petersburg bordering eastern Estonia, but for the return flight the exit point was not so crucial and, so as to take advantage of a shorter distance over the earth and a lesser strength of headwind, we now had the option to fly at a higher latitude coming home. Taking the route of a higher latitude reduced both the flight time and fuel-burn on the return to Dublin.

Across Mongolia and Russia, from Ulaanbataar to Krasnoyarsk to Niznevartovsk to Surgut and then just south of Archangel on the White Sea to northern Europe we went. Leaving Russia behind us as we flew over Northern Karelia and, on transferring to Finnish air traffic control, the unanimous feeling amongst the crew was that we were home. I noticed on these westbound flights especially that the summer weather over Finland and Sweden was extraordinarily good whereas Norway had a more typically West of Ireland summer.

Our reception at Dublin Airport was always enthusiastic and professionally brisk as the Aer Lingus loading teams transferred the PPE cargo to the Army Logistics for transport and distribution to the HSE and frontline medical personnel. As we walked away from the A330, feeling weary and fighting the powerful impetus to sleep, it was indeed a feeling of satisfaction to know that we had achieved something that aided the great lifesavers of the front line in their fight against the beast COVID-19.

# PC-12NG SPECTRE

By Sgt Karl Byrne  
Photos by Sgt Colum Lawlor



The PC-12NG on the ramp just outside the hanger in Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnell

Comdt Mick Barcoe Officer Commanding 104 Sqn (Squadron) talked to Capt Cian Clancy of the Defence Forces Press Office back in October of 2020 for the Defence Forces Podcast series. The interview was specifically about the purchase of 4 PC-12NG aircraft by the Defence Forces. This article is derived from that podcast.

Comdt Mick Barcoe joined the Air Corps (AC) back in September 2007. He had previously completed a degree in mechanical engineering in DIT (Dublin Institute of Technology). He grew up in Dublin, over-looking one of the approach paths to Baldonnell, something he remembers fondly as he would have watched all the aircraft coming in to land from an early age.

Commissioned in 2010 into 104 Sqn, he began his flying with the now de-commissioned CESSNA aircraft, he also flew with the CASA, which is still in service today. In 2015 he completed his flight instructor's course and spent a period of his career in the Flight Training School in Baldonnell, he also spent time in SPB (Strategic Planning Branch) in Newbridge in the Department of Defence building, also serving in the Air Corps Press Office. He is now serving as OC (Officer Commanding) 104 Sqn which is where the new PC-12NGs operate from.

The contract for the purchase of the PC-12NGs was signed December 2017. A full project team of engineers, technicians, pilots and CIS personnel were designated to oversee the project. The PC-12NG aircraft is not an 'off-the-shelf aircraft' as Mick explained. It takes 3 months to build the aircraft, but the AC needed the aircraft to be bespoke and fitted out with various types of equipment to suit them, which in itself may take up to 2 years to modify and complete.

Over the last couple of years the AC would have spent a lot of time coordinating with the manufacturer Pilatus, as well as travelling over and back to Switzerland and the USA through the testing and evaluation phase of the project. Pilatus are a Swiss based company, who were founded in 1939, they produce various types of aircraft, notably the PC-12NG and

the PC-9. The PC-12NGs that were contracted to be bought by the AC were based over in Colorado for a period of time, where they were taken from being a standard PC-12NG to a PC-12NG that met the requirements that the AC needed. A light to medium aircraft, it can take 9 passengers or a tonne and a half of cargo. It is a single-engine aeroplane that is fitted with one of the most reliable engines in the world, the Pratt & Whitney PT6. It can cruise up to 30,000ft and it can also fly at the same approach speed as commercial airliners, allowing it to operate from busy international airports. The versatility means it's capable of landing in a semi-prepared strip (or a grass strip) also on a very short landing strip, something which commercial airliners cannot do. It's quite unique for an aircraft that can carry such a large payload for its size, also can cruise up to 30,000ft and then land on a small grass strip. "It's exactly the type of aircraft that the Defence Forces needs" said Mick.

The aircraft will have 3 mission sets, set out by 104 Sqn. Firstly, military transport, which is the passage of military cargo or Defence Forces personnel. Secondly, ISR, which is Intelligence, Surveillance & reconnesance. And lastly, Air Ambulance, each aircraft is fitted out with lifeport systems, also seen on the AW 139 helicopters, Casa and the Learjet. The lifeport system is a stretcher unit that is able to take



The PC - 12NG manoeuvring on the ramp before moving onto the runway

power from the aircraft which can, in turn, power essential medical equipment in order to keep patients stable while they are in transit.

The range of the PC-12 varies, as all aircraft do, depending on environmental conditions like headwinds and the actual pay-load you're carrying; but roughly if you're carrying a tonne of payload you will be able to fly 1500 nautical miles which converts to around 2800km. This aspect of its versatility



One of the PC-12's flying over farmland during an air to air photoshoot

can determine the ability for the pilots to complete any of its missions, be it in the military transport role, ISR role or Air Ambulance role.



The PC - 12 sitting in on the ramp

The aircraft has a modular setting inside, it is very versatile and has a multi-roll capability, you can take out half the seats to accommodate more cargo with cargo nets to separate personnel from cargo. A mission suit can be installed very quickly for the aircraft's ISR capability or you can put in the lifeport system. Within the space of a few hours the aircraft can be reconfigured to fit the mission's needs.



A PC-12 on the ramp at Pilatus training facility in Switzerland

Within the first 3 weeks of being operational the Sqn had to carry out an Air Ambulance flight from Germany confirming the aircraft's ability to do so within a relatively short space of time in service. Through the Covid-19 Pandemic they have also been travelling to and from Germany with the Covid-19 test samples: up to 18,000 test samples could be taken inside one PC-12 aircraft. Also they've carried out resupply flights to the mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), as well as a troop rotation to Western Sahara (MINURSO).

Covid-19 has had an effect on the PC-12 coming into service however; the initial contract was for 3 PC-12 aircraft, to be delivered in September 2020. But with the restriction on commercial air travel early on in the year and the resupply of personnel overseas being affected by this, the decision was made to purchase a fourth PC-12, and that was done in a very short space of time by a very hard-working team. It was



At the bottom of the runway the PC - 12 prepares to start its take off procedures

approximately 13 days from when the decision was made to buy the aircraft to when it landed in Ireland! At the time there was a PC-12 training aircraft with a Pilatus company pilot, training the AC pilots from the end of February right up to the middle of March, so by the time the 3 new aircraft landed it didn't take long for the sqn to become operational. The additional PC-12 (280) is actually white, due to a different customer's cancelled order of the aircraft. Due to COVID-19 the standardisation of the aircraft towards the other 3 hasn't happened yet, as the sqn want to keep the aircraft operationally ready at all times.

Even though the 4 aircraft are now in situ, the project isn't over yet. One of the less obvious differences between the PC-12 and the CESSNA is that it now takes 2 pilots to fly the aircraft. The crew in the rear need to be trained and upskilled, the aircraft technicians need to do training on the engine and the airframe and the avionics technicians also need to upskill and retrain for the PC-12, not to forget the maintainers who look after the mission system in the aircraft who also have to be retained. It's a huge team effort to get the aircraft up and flying, and as Mick says "As pilots we probably get far too much credit for the work that we do". CIS also have a part to play in the PC-12, as the aircraft becomes more modern and there is more software integration, it requires the upkeep of the software; and that's where CIS fill that void, to make sure we get the most out of the equipment.

A question that Capt Clancy asked was 'what is the aircraft like to fly?' to which Mick answered "It's an absolutely fantastic aircraft. Fundamentally, with regards to the physical characteristics of flying it, for the size of the aircraft it's actually quite agile, it can travel at a nice speed, so from that perspective it's quite nice to fly. I remember when I started to learn how to fly the aircraft - something that I was a bit intimidated by initially - was just how modern the cockpit was and the avionics, it was the first time ever sitting in a cockpit where we had a mouse ball and a clicker....."

The PC-12 gives the pilot a huge amount of situational awareness: it can give you information on where you are at the time, where you're going to be in the next 20 mins of the flight and information on what options you have with that information. With the operational versatility of the aircraft, the PC-12 promises to be one of the best planes that the Air Corps have ever flown.

The podcast episode can be accessed via the Irish Defence Forces Podcast on Spotify, S2EP9 - SPECTRE

#### Pilatus PC-12 Statistics

Aircraft Type - Pilatus PC-12/47E

Role(s) - Logistics, Air Ambulance, Military Transport, Intelligence, Surveillance and Resonnaissance

Crew - 2 Pilots and up to 9 Passengers

Powerplant - 1 x Pratt and Whitney PT6A-67P

Wing Span - 53.4 ft

Height - 14.0 ft

Length - 47.3 ft

Entered Service - 2020

#### Pilatus PC-12 Performance

Max T/O Weight - 4700kh (10450 lbs)

Service Ceiling - 30,000 feet

Cruise Speed - 270 knots/500 kph

Maximum Speed – 280 knots/518 kph

Endurance - 4 hours

Range - 1500 Nautical Miles / 2778 km



# UNIFIL REPORT, 117TH INF BN

OC 117th Inf Bn Lt Col Fred O'Donovan prepares for an interview with the press during their MRE

By Tony O'Brien  
Photos by A/M Sam Gibney

COVID-19 has affected every aspect of Irish life as we all know only too well. But it is also impacting considerably on our UNIFIL troops serving in the Lebanon.

The recent deployment had to spend 14 days in quarantine in the Glen of Imaal before departure, wait out another fortnight in quarantine when they got to camp in the Lebanon, will have to go without any leave (and visits home) during their full six months away and must suffer various restrictions while on duty there.

But as professional soldiers trained to deal with all eventualities, they take it in their stride: "As soldiers we are very adaptable and we have adapted quickly", explained Lt Col Fred O'Donovan, Officer Commanding 117th Infantry Battalion.

In his role as Commander of around 600 UNIFIL troops from four nationalities in Lebanon, Dubliner Fred O'Donovan certainly has had his hands full in the time of COVID. Lt Col O'Donovan and his Irish troops arrived in Lebanon on November 11th, but it was not a simple trip or preparation. "We were in quarantine for 14 days in the Glen of Imaal before we left and on arrival here we have had to do another fortnight in quarantine," he said. It is the seventh tour of overseas duty for Fred, his third in Lebanon. In addition, he



A member of the 117th Inf Bn patrols the roads of the Glen of Imaal while on exercise for the battalions MRE



Members of the 117th Inf Bn fire an 84mm Anti - Tank round during the MRE

has served in Chad, Afghanistan, Kosovo and in Brussels for a time. "A lot of our troops are now very experienced in terms of serving overseas. Its par-for-the-course really, part of the job and we have come to accept it as part of our service," he says.

And, of course, serving overseas brings its own challenges, personally and professionally. "It's always hard leaving home for all of us. It is a particular sacrifice this time because of COVID, as it is a six-month trip without any leave, which is unusual. That's particularly tough because of Christmas, especially for those with young children." He added: "On past missions we could have looked forward to leave so we would get home to see the family and loved ones at some point but that's not going to happen this time unfortunately. But we have to accept it and get on with our job here."

Irish troops have been serving with UNIFIL in Lebanon since 1978. This means they have built up an extraordinary rapport with the local people and a great understanding of local culture and way-of-life. "We have spent a lot of time here, more or less in the same area, so we have gotten to know the people very well. They appreciate our presence and what we are doing here and they have always been very welcoming. The locals love the Irish, in fact some now even speak with a Dublin, Cork or Mayo accent", recalls Lt Col O'Donovan.



A member of the 117th Inf Bn being interviewed by Virgin Media during the MRE

because of quarantine restrictions he had not yet had a chance to go out and meet everyone under his command. However, he is already familiar with the Maltese soldiers as they had trained in the Glen of Imaal also: "They speak very good English, though they sometimes have difficulties understanding the Irish accents!"

Before departing Ireland, Lt Col O'Donovan and his troops underwent standard deployment training. But because of COVID even this presented challenges. "Normally in training we would speak to groups of around 30 in lectures but because of COVID the groups could be no bigger than 10 which meant we had to do it three times which, of course, added to the time involved." Also, 'Pods' were established with groups of soldiers representing various ranks and skills. "The idea was that because the Pods were mixed, if one person fell sick it would not cripple the mission, the other Pods could continue as normal. It means there would be limited disruption to the operation of the Battalion should anyone catch the virus."

On the training, he said it was essentially refresher training. "It's getting a group of people working together where they might not traditionally do so, getting to know



Members of the 117th Inf Bn firing the .5 HMG in the Glen of Imaal

their comrades so they would not be meeting for the first time when we arrived in Lebanon." Even when they got on the plane for the Lebanon they had to suffer a setback. "We had to stopover in Manchester because of a fault with the aeroplane. We had a long wait for a part to arrive which meant a flight time of 14 hours."

COVID is an ever-present issue, before they left Ireland and now in Lebanon. "Numbers are very high here and they are going in to a lockdown situation. But then people back home are having to put up with COVID restrictions, so it is the same for everyone." And there are also impacts as Lt Col O'Donovan and his troops try to go about their everyday duties.

"Our movements are limited while meetings we would normally do face-to-face now have to be done over Zoom or Skype. However, patrols with the Lebanese Army continue as normal."

Everyday life in the camp has also seen changes, he explains: "COVID has meant changes here in terms of the numbers eating or socialising together at any one time. Even the sleeping and recreational arrangements have had to be adjusted to take account of social distancing etc." An interesting and somewhat unusual 'headache' in terms of accommodating the needs of the troops is that normally about 20 per cent of the battalion would be on leave at any



Members of the 117th Inf Bn firing the Javelin Anti - Tank missile in the Glen of Imaal

given time but with no leave allowed over the six month tour, a full complement of soldiers is always present in the camp and have to be looked after with COVID restrictions in mind.

On camp life generally, Lt Col O'Donovan says: "Food is very good, we have Wi-Fi through the camp and good recreational facilities, even though these have had to be changed to take into account COVID restrictions." With no leave allowed for six months, keeping in touch with home is more important than ever for the Irish troops overseas. These days it is much easier than in the past thanks to Wi-Fi and Face time and WhatsApp etc. They have made a huge difference in terms of talking to family back home. And, of course, it will be particularly important at Christmas time."

He added: "When I first served overseas you had to rely on a satellite link to phone home, but it was expensive and you had to pay for it yourself." And even in these days of instant hi-tech communications and social media etc, it is interesting to learn that the traditional written letter is still very popular. "Yes, they are still very important because it is great to get a letter from your children, your wife, your partner or your mother or father. It's a lovely means of hearing from home."

Then there is Christmas. "It will be tough on people, especially those with young children, but we will do our best to make the day special for everyone. We are still planning it, but we will definitely celebrate Christmas. The canteen will be busy, I can certainly say that."

For Fred personally he will be thinking of his family back home in Castlebar – wife Patricia and triplet daughters Katie, Sarah and Anna – and a going home date in May 2021.

# FLEET SUPPORT GROUP PART 2



Fisheries boarding Team in MST at full speed



By SCPO Ruairí de Barra  
Photos by SCPO Ruairí de Barra

A view of Haulbowline from the air showing the completed east side of the island

## Smooth sea never made skilled sailor

When an artificer has finished their two-year rotation at sea, they may be posted ashore to FSG. They bring with them all the knowledge and experience of using the boats in operational circumstances, which they will draw on as they will now be working much deeper on them.

This brings invaluable resources to a unit which has a strategic value to the state. Not only does FSG maintain the working boats of the NS, they also provide support to the wider Defence Forces, including the Army Ranger Wing and the Naval Service Diving Section. FSG is also often called on to assist other state agencies who operate watercraft of various descriptions. As part of FSG, they will have the opportunity to work on everything from stern drives to gearboxes and engine rebuilds. Again, this builds on the knowledge of the artificers and the cycle of learning continues, as that artificer will bring all their new problem solving and practical experience with them back out into the flotilla.

The training of artificers isn't just confined to the engines and hulls however; the artificers must also operate the tractors, trailers and cranes which they use to manoeuvre the boats around the naval basin and dockyard environs to their workshops in FSG. Launching and recovering RHIBs from slips and quay walls.

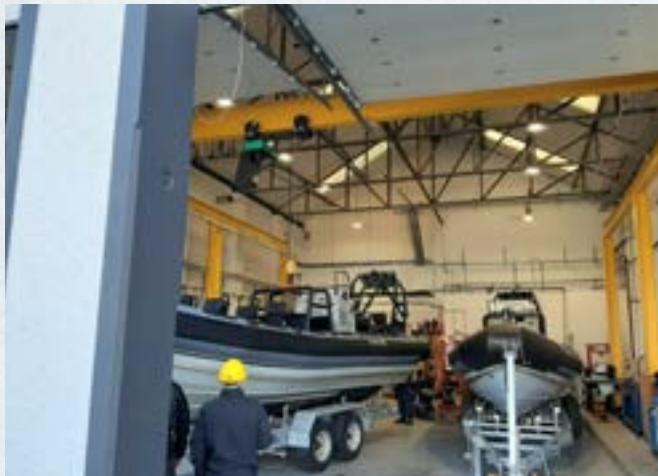
Then they must also become RHIBs coxswains in order to test the RHIBs after work have been completed, as each RHIB must be in tip top condition prior to it being accepted back to its ship. This makes FSG a hive of activity throughout the year, as the NS have ships operational 24/7, 365, and if those ships are to do their important work at sea, they will need their boats to make it happen. With this level of constant busyness FSG was nicknamed 'the ninth ship', however with the arrival of LÉ George Bernard Shaw it may have to change to 'the tenth.'

## Every day is a learning day

PO/ERA Aidan Ahern is a dab hand with a hurley and he handles a socket wrench with just as much skill. He joined the NS in 2011, when he says that "the economic downturn had led to job opportunities lessening outside, so I saw an advert for the Naval Service and signed up." He holds a BEng in Quantity Surveying from CIT and when he joined the NS

initially, the only options in his recruit class were Seamans or Communications branches. As he always maintained his interest in engineering, he says he applied for his technical trainee scheme as an ERA as he "...thought it would be a good fit." Leaving his career as a Communications Operative and switching paths he began his trade in Mechanical Automation

and Maintenance Fitting in 2014, and he was promoted to PO/ERA in the summer of 2020. Currently he is due to rotate to sea in November to "...start my first full rotation as PO/ERA and engineering watchkeeper." He is enjoying his time in FSG, as he says he finds "...working on the complicated



MST 4 enters the workshop

mechanical systems is very interesting. The work with stern drives, gearboxes and larger engine jobs means that every day is a learning day. So, you get to broaden your knowledge base." Working side by side, both wearing COVID-19 PPE to protect each other within the tight confines of the engine bay of an MST 680, with PO/ERA Ahern is L/ERA Simon Murphy.

L/ERA Murphy joined a year after PO/ERA Ahern in 2012. He started his career as a mechanician and, because he really enjoyed the more technical aspects of his role, he successfully competed for a TT scheme in 2016. He was promoted to Leading Hand just this October. He enjoys the time he has got to spend in FSG over his years of training "I find it very interesting; I like working with the RHIBs and smaller engines. There is such a great variety of different problems, and you have to devise the solutions." L/ERA Murphy is only passing through briefly as he waits for his standard NCOs course to begin shortly, after which he says he will "rotate to sea in January 2021. I will be going out to



Naval Service Dive Team in a Polarcirkel boat



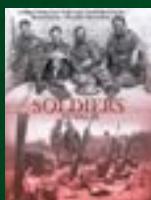
Naval Service Divers exercise with a customs Dog unit

gain experience as an understudy watchkeeper. Then it will be back to the NMCI for my ERA 4 course in early summer."

All artificers are not just trained in their off-the-job phase or college courses; they are also trained in-house on their professional course. Typically these are numbered 1-4 and course number 4 marks the transition from Able Rate to Leading Rate for all three crafts. For Engine Room artificers, after their extensive written examinations, ERA 4 culminates in their oral watchkeeping exam after which they will stand a watch at sea of their own, with all the responsibility that entails. For the Hull and Electrical Artificer, similar in-depth examinations wait, and they can then be entrusted with their own ship, sometimes as the sole practitioner and subject matter expert on-board.



Trainee Technicians Engine Room Artificer's working on a RHIB

**BOOKS**


**Author:** Michael Guerin  
**Where to buy:** [omahony.ie](http://omahony.ie)  
**ISBN:** 9780992742423  
**Pages:** 192  
**Price:** €12.99



**Author:** Ian Cobain  
**Publisher:** Granta  
**ISBN:** 9781783786589  
**Pages:** 288  
**Price:** €16.99

## SOLDIERS We Will Be

Included in this book's 192 pages of military history are over 400 photographs, some unique of the Civil War, Emergency Period and the author's own photos taken of FCA days in Kerry from 1960's to 2003, including Colonel Leo Quinlan's Lecture "The Siege of Jadotville" in Listowel 2017 & 100th Anniversary WW1 Listowel 2018. This book is about Soldiers that answered various military calls in the period. It is presented without judgement or reason for becoming a soldier, but Michael hopes that the reader will get a better understanding of the motivations behind soldiering and the life of a soldier.

Information includes:

- Wolfe Tone's retreat to the Shannon Estuary on a French ship in 1796
- The British response in fortifying the Shannon Estuary during the Napoleonic period
- Military History from Church of Ireland records
- The story of Horatio Kitchener and Those that answered his call to arms WW1
- The War of Independence & the Civil war in North Kerry
- The Emergency 1939 to FCA Days in Kerry
- The Building of Fort Shannon 1942 (near Tarbert)
- Using material researched from contemporary sources, step by step we witnessed the unfolding drama and birth pangs of Ireland's nationhood – Military History researched over many years.

Michael Guerin is a native of Listowel and was a member of the FCA (Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil – Local Defence Force) from 1962 to 2003. He previously published the "The Lartigue Listowel & Ballybunion Railway" and "Listowel Workhouse Union"

## Anatomy of a Killing: Life & Death on a Divided Island

This Reviewer in conversation with the Journalist David McKittrick described the book Lost Lives which he co-edited, which specifies chronologically every one of some 3,700 deaths that took place during the Troubles: as a terrible but important book. When McKittrick asked why I told him that a good friend from Northern Ireland had said that every household in Ireland should have a copy, to remind future generations of the ripples of grief and anguish caused by these deaths; and as a warning to dissuade a younger generation of any supposed glamour associated with violence.

One of these "ripples of grief" is the death listed in Lost Lives as number 2,017, the killing of RUC Constable Millar McAllister on an otherwise quiet unremarkable afternoon in Lisburn on Saturday 22 April 1978. At this juncture of the Troubles not a single member of

the RUC had been killed in Lisburn, it was a killing specifically ordered by the IRA to strike fear into the many security forces members who lived in what the IRA themselves referred to as the 'Citadel.' Lisburn was perceived as being simply too dangerous for IRA Active Service Units (ASUs) to operate in, because it was a predominantly Protestant garrison town. The killing of this man, an RUC photographer, family man and avid pigeon fancier had the due shock effect. It also had an obvious shocking effect on his family as his death was witnessed by his two young sons. His IRA killer dressed in a pin stripe suit posed as someone from the pigeon racing fraternity. IRA activists interrogated at Castlereagh identified and matched McAllister from an English racing pigeon magazine where his photo had appeared in articles that he had contributed. It was this piece of otherwise innocuous information that led his killer, ironically a republican Protestant, former British army soldier, who had converted to militant republicanism when he faced discrimination from within his own community over his marriage to a Catholic woman. His 'conversion' was total to the cause he embraced and even now has no regrets about taking the life of Millar McAllister.

The Terrorism expert Professor Andrew Silke has described Killing Rage by the Irish Republican Eamon Collins as one of the most important books to emerge from the Troubles, in its physiological description of how one man followed the path to revolutionary terrorism and planned the killing of the IRA's perceived enemies. In time this work, Anatomy of a Killing by the award-winning Journalist Ian Cobain will be seen in the same light.

In a work that reads like a thriller, but is not fiction, it details in chilling detail the meticulous planning and preparation in the killing of Millar McAllister. It charts the road of the key protagonists in the IRA ASU in their conversion to militant republicanism. It also deals with the immediate aftermath of the killing where the IRA ASU were arrested, interrogated, their trial and subsequent jailing, and their view of their role at this remove. The book also gives an insight into the claustrophobic, paranoid atmosphere that existed in Northern Ireland during this period, and how very few sections of society were immune from the violence, a modern generation can forget just how intense and prolonged this sustained visceral turmoil in a relatively small place was. This is a very considered piece of work by Cobain, nonjudgmental and dispassionate throughout. As Cobain leads to the dreadful denouement of the killing, he also examines the political backdrop of the conflict, the evolution and development of both British security policy and the corresponding Long War strategy enunciated by Gerry Adams. Cobain has chillingly displayed that the death of Millar McAllister was not just a statistic but another "ripple of grief" that then and now affected the lives of a cohort of people on both sides of the political and religious divide.

Review by **Dr. Rory Finegan (Comdt Retd)**

Taken from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

## BOOKS



**Author:** Monica Crofton  
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**ISBN:** 978-1-5272-6681-0  
**Pages:** 324  
**Price:** €25.00



**Author:** Leigh Neville  
**Publisher:** Osprey Publishing  
**ISBN:** 9781472824295  
**Pages:** 368  
**Price:** €42.00

### 300 Paces Outside the Town Gate

On a small hill on the south side of Wexford town, half hidden by a high wall there is a military barracks. It is almost invisible and is scarcely ever noticed by the people of Wexford as they pass it by.

Yet the History of this building and of the Norman castle that stood on the same site before it, is the history of Wexford town itself.

Four years in the writing, this thoroughly researched book charts the nine centuries of strife, upheaval and social change through the eyes of the castle and barracks exploring the complex but always close relationship between the castle and the town.

Just outside the town wall the town the Norman Castle stood. There the people paid their taxes and rents to a lord they seldom if ever saw. There they were brought to court, there imprisoned if they broke a law they sometimes did not understand and there they served a soldiers in the lord's army when called upon to do so.

This book gives a short biography of all the constables in charge of Wexford castle that we can name, and narrates their deeds in Wexford as they tried to subdue the rebellious Irish families of the north of the county.

It was through this castle that Cromwell gained control of Wexford. This book examines closely what happened on that fateful day when James Stafford, the Castle Constable, yielded the castle to Cromwell.

The castle was demolished in 1723 and from the same stones the present barracks was built.

In 1798 it was home to the North Cork Militia. The barracks was embroiled in the rebellion from beginning to end.

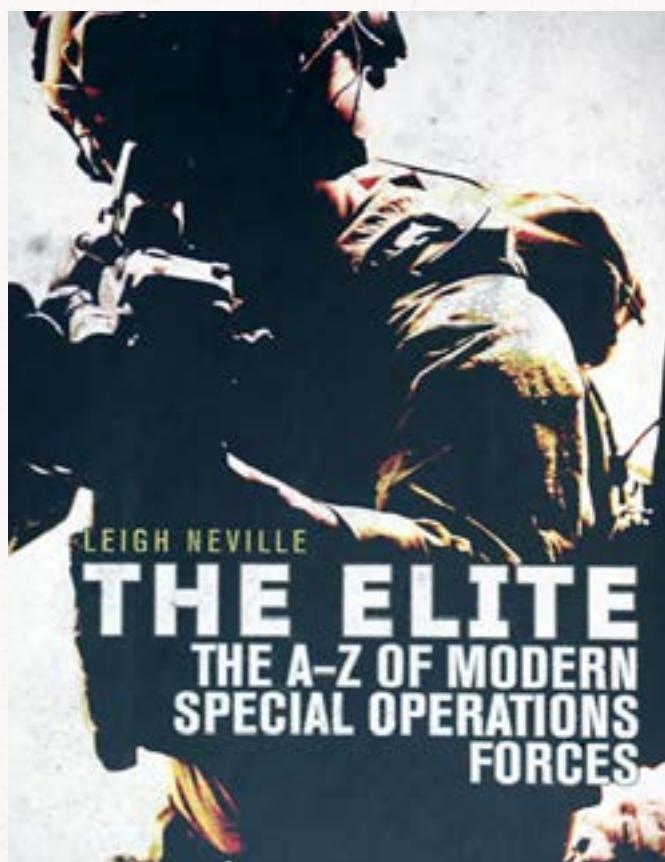
There followed a series of Militia regiments from all over Ireland and English and Scottish soldiers who served on garrison duty. This book tells the stories of all of them all of them.

The book traces the growth of republicanism in the town, Wexford's reaction to the 1916 Rebellion and the gradual change in the attitude of the authorities and people of Wexford to an English Army stationed at the barracks. The war for independence, the civil war and the training of the LDF in the Second World War are all part of the story of this building.

It is my aim as author of this book to highlight the importance of this historic building.

### The Elite: The A-Z of Modern Special Operations Forces

Using rare and previously unpublished images from around the world, The Elite: The A-Z of Modern Special Operations Forces is the ultimate guide to the secretive world of modern special operations forces. It sends the reader back in time to operations such as Eagle Claw in Iran and the recapture of the Iranian Embassy in London and then forward to recent operations against al-Shabaab and Islamic State. Entries also detail units ranging from the New Zealand SAS Group to the Polish GROM, and key individuals from Iraq counter-terrorism strategist General Stanley McChrystal to Victoria Cross recipient SASR Corporal Mark Donaldson. Answering questions such as how much the latest four-tube night vision goggles worn by the SEALs in Zero Dark Thirty cost, which pistol is most widely employed by special operators around the world and why, and if SOF still use HALO jumps, this book is the definitive single-source guide to the world's elite special forces.



Information provided by Monica Crofton

Taken from [www.easons.com](http://www.easons.com)

# PEOPLE OF THE DEFENCE FORCES

By Cpl Martin Bennett  
Photo by Cpl Martin Bennett



Rank - Gnr  
Name - Robbie McCarthy

This week we speak to Gnr [Gunner] Robbie McCarthy, a soldier in the STA unit [Surveillance target acquisition] in the 2nd Artillery Regiment in Custume Barracks Athlone. Robbie is also a world champion handballer. He has won everything there is to be won in the sport of handball, with titles from under 12 right up to senior Irish and World titles.

## What got you into handball?

"I got into handball from watching my father play all over the country, I started playing at 6 years of age and started to get really competitive after a few years when there was a chance of free trips to America to play the best over there".

## Who has had the biggest influence on your career?

"I would have to say my father as he got me interested in the sport in the first place. But in my late teens I met a brilliant Coach and mentor in Peter Leahy who is actually the Coach of the Mayo ladies football team, he put a lot of structure on my routine. Before that I had no real structure and was playing every sport. He added way more professionalism to my game. He had me on a very specific training regime which was completely new to me. It was definitely the turning point in my handball career".

## What is happening in the handball world at the moment with regards to COVID 19

"Well my All Ireland final which was supposed to have been played in March is on hold at the minute with no date set. Also, the state of the art alley in Croke Park is being used as a testing centre at the minute so it's all very much up in the air right now. It's just a matter of me staying as ready as I can to play, the moment the restrictions are lifted".

## What does it take to become a top competitor?

"Commitment, dedication, skills and fitness. The reason

I put commitment first though, is because it wasn't until I cut out all the other sports I was doing, that I really improved as a player and got to reach my full potential".

## What physical attributes would you need to succeed?

"I find endurance is a massive factor in tight games. Endurance can affect your concentration which can then affect your decision making. Shots that you would easily execute early in the game can become messy if you are starting to fatigue".

## Did you find the Army training helped you in any area of your sport?

"Definitely. I would say the Army brought a lot of physical and mental toughness to my game. In the middle of a really tight game, after playing for over an hour, I would often think about the tough challenges I have faced in a recruit training or an exercise and realise I have come through tougher situations than this game. I found that has given me a mental edge over the player I was before I joined the Defence forces".

## When did you join the Defence forces?

"I joined in 2014 at 27 years of age. I initially joined and served in the Navy, which presented its own challenges for handball as you can imagine. I had to put handball on hold for the initial 6 months, but I feel it stood to me in other ways with regards to resilience and fitness. In October 2019 I transferred over to the Artillery in Custume barracks Athlone and I have been serving here since. The Unit here are very supportive of sport and the gym facilities are excellent".

## What are your plans for the future?

"I am really hoping to go overseas in the coming year and come back to play at a high level again. I want to experience the overseas environment and I'm sure, like everything I've experienced in the Defence forces so far, it will present its own challenges and make me more resilient and tougher - both as a person and a player".

# PEOPLE OF THE DEFENCE FORCES

By Barry McCall  
Photo by DF Flickr



Name - Billy Doyle

## Billy's story

Airman Billy Doyle came out to his colleagues in the Defence Forces in 2016 when he attended the launch of the LGBTA Defend with Pride Network in The Curragh.

"I met colleagues who were also gay," he recalls. "I stood beside the banner in uniform and took a picture of myself and shared it on social media. That was me saying 'this is who I am'. I received massive support on social media following that. It was overwhelming. I've had nothing but a positive experience so far. I think the Defence Forces is a very inclusive place to work."

He joined the Defence Forces in August 2001 having had an unhappy time at school. "I was never really interested in school," he explains. "I had a tough time there and was bullied a lot. I knew I didn't want to go to college or anything like that. I finished school in June and joined the Defence Forces in August. One of the reasons why I think I joined is I wanted to get a tougher skin."

He first got interested in a Defence Forces career when he joined the Reserve Defence Force, formerly known as the FCA. "I really enjoyed that experience we had some Permanent Defence Forces guys training us and they piqued my interest. I went to summer camp in The Curragh after my Leaving and joined up after that. Made a couple of friends during that camp and they joined with me. Nineteen years on, I am still friends with people I trained with that year."

His current role with the Air Corps sees him working in the photography section and as a Barrack Personnel Support Service Officer (BPSSO) which involves supporting the mental health of colleagues.

"I was always interested in photography," he says. "Every day is completely different. I could be taking a portrait photograph of someone one day and the

next be flying 100 miles off the coast of Ireland taking pictures of whales. That was among the best experiences of my career. Even from altitude the size of two blue whales is amazing. It lets you know how lucky you are. As a BPSSO I received Safe Talk suicide prevention training. I was already interested in the mental health side of things and I had gone back to college and got an honours degree in psychology."

His work as a BPSSO is about availability and an open door. "It's more of a sense people being able to come to you. Everyone knows about the service and people can come to you if they're not having a good day. It's a 24/7 service and we are here all the time."

The Defence Forces continues to support his personal and professional development and he is currently studying for a Masters in Geospatial Analysis at UCD.

He acknowledges that joining the army might not have appeared an obvious career choice for a gay man who had been bullied at school. "I was shy and timid and was probably a bit different at school. I wasn't a lad's lad. It might seem a bit like jumping from the pan to the fire joining the Defence Forces, but my experience wasn't anything like that. It's been absolutely fine. It's pretty much the same as being straight, I've never had any issues."

He recommends a Defence Forces career to everyone. "After your pre-training you can choose a career path that you are interested in. You are in control of that. There are not many places you can say that about. If you are a young LGBT kid but are afraid to join the Defence Forces because of your sexuality I would say you have nothing to worry about. You are not alone, and you will be very well supported when you join. Don't let your sexuality hold you back."

# DIRTY BOOTS



## Carrauntoohil hill walk

Information provided by Outsider, Irelands Adventure Magazine and can be viewed on their website <https://outsider.ie/ireland/hiking-carrauntoohil-essential-information/>

Carrauntoohil is Ireland's highest mountain at a height of 1,039m. It's a challenging climb, but it's also truly magnificent.

Standing at 1,039m, Carrauntoohil is the highest mountain in Ireland and is set among the beautiful Macgillycuddy Reeks in Co Kerry. Given their height, this mountain range can have very changeable weather and can be dangerous at times so experience or a guide is required if you're new to the area.

The Reeks, with 27 individual peaks, are Ireland's highest mountain range and cover an area of around 100 square kilometres from the Gap of Dunloe in the east to Glencar in the west. Up to 25,000 hill walkers go adventuring through their vales and hills every year – it's a brilliant playground!

The range is littered with lakes, forests, cliffs, stunning ridges and incredible peaks to explore for hikers of all abilities. Some of the taller mountains like

Carrauntoohil, Beenkeeragh and Caher require experience and fitness and are the only mountains in Ireland that are more than 1000m high.

Given Carrauntoohil's closeness to the Atlantic Ocean, the weather can be very changeable very fast, so you should be prepared for wet, wind, cold and more if you're heading into the hills there.

There are three main routes up the mountain and you're strongly advised to always carry a map, or go with a guide if you're not that experienced and haven't navigated or climbed the mountain before. There's more on essential kit needed for these mountains below.

Carrauntoohil Ordnance Survey Maps: 78

Carrauntoohil Duration: 12-13 km return, 5-7 hours return

Good for: Pretty hardcore hikers who want to tackle Ireland's highest peaks, or intermediate hill walkers ready to step up.

The most popular route, or tourist route as it's often known, is the Devil's Ladder (12km return). It's the most direct and shortest route and is a pretty strenuous walk that will take you between four and six hours. The track is fairly easy to see and follow. Due to the popularity of this trail, it is eroded in parts and is quite loose underfoot through the steep ladder part.

Most people start this route at Cronin's Yard and follow the well-worn path up through Hag's Glen, crossing the lovely Gaddagh River. There are big stepping stones to take you across the river, but be careful making the crossing. You can avoid the crossing by going through O'Shea's Gully instead (route 2 below).

Hag's Glen is a wide open valley that's really beautiful with a lake on either side of the trail, Lough Gouragh and Callee. You'll hike through a fairly boggy/marshy section before reaching the base of the Devil's Ladder.

The Devil's Ladder is quite a tough part of the climb due to its steepness and the loose rocks/pebbles/erosion on this part of the trail. It's a steep gully with loose scree that can get quite crowded so it's best to leave some room between you and others to avoid falling stones (or people). Due to erosion, it can be a bit unstable in places so extra caution is advised. It can be quite dangerous in wet or icy conditions. A walking stick or two can be really helpful.

Once you've scaled the ladder, the trail veers right to take you up the long climb to the summit. There are a few offshoots branching off on either side,

but each leads to the top so take your pick. The final stretch to the summit has hazards on either side, so be really careful in poor visibility or bad weather. There's a dangerous area above Curraghmore if you go left so beware of that. And on the right, a narrow trail will take you across the face of the mountain and on to the Heavenly Gates.

After all your hard work, the summit is breath taking. You'll be surrounded by a rich panorama of mountain peaks and dramatic ridges in nearly every direction. There are also numerous lakes to be spotted, the Wild Atlantic Way in the distance, and to the north east, you should see the rich farmland of Co Kerry.

Carrauntoohil is topped with a cross, which had to be replaced after being cut down by vandals in November 2014. The local community rallied together and carried tools up to get the cross back up within weeks.

Beware when descending from the summit as there is hazardous steep ground in many directions. The Kerry Mountain Rescue Team warn that "there are NO safe descent routes anywhere to the north, northeast, east or southeast of the summit. Always carry a map and a compass and have at least one competent navigator in your group (ie. capable of accurate navigation in all conditions, including white-out and darkness)."

Best advice is to closely retrace your steps the way you came up, to ask for directions if you're in any doubt and use a compass and map to be safe.

## Carrauntoohil: Essential Kit

It's vital to bring proper kit when hiking a serious mountain like Carrauntoohil. That means planning as if you'll be staying out after dark or overnight, just in case you get into trouble.

The main things to remember are to wear quality, supportive hiking boots, bring waterproof gear (top and bottoms), extra warm layers, hat and gloves for cold, and a map and compass (and know how to use them!).

Bring plenty of food and water, providing for longer than you plan to be out walking, just in case. It's also wise to bring some emergency kit, including a whistle, torch (and spare battery), first aid kit and survival blanket and bag.

Gaiters for your boots and a rucksack liner are wise if the weather has been wet, which is usually the case. Also, pack your phone and make sure it's fully charged.



By Cpl Martin Bennett  
Photos by Capt Gearoid O'Briain

Gearoid departing from Sligo Airport in a Pilatus PC - 9M

# CHOOSE YOUR SUFFERING

"Either way, whatever you choose, it's going to hurt. I have often suffered more during 10km races than I have suffered during Marathons, simply because my heart wasn't in it" Those were the words of Capt Gearoid O'Briain, after his latest undertaking, which was a 50km race with a 4000 meter ascent, on the 15th of August in the Derryveagh mountains in Donegal, or more commonly known as the Seven Sisters skyline.

Gearoid is no stranger to suffering, having already paddled to Scotland in a kayak, he also entered the Guinness book of records for the fastest marathon ever completed with a 20lb pack. Gearoid joined the Cadets in 2006. Through the rigorous nature of Cadet training, he started to develop an interest in endurance training, both the physical and mental aspect of it. Before this his background was mostly in athletics and rugby.

When I asked him what inspired him to take on his latest challenge, he replied, "I always try to pick something that scares me a little, something I think might be just beyond my limit". On training for this event, Gearoid said he trusted his own instinct. "Having just had a newborn baby I had to opt for high intensity and low frequency training. I would train twice a week. For one session, I would find a hill and run up and down it as hard as I could for a couple of hours, and then for the second session I would go out and run 40 or 50 Kilometers over 4-5 hours".



Gearoid is pictured here during the 7 Sisters Mountain Marathon



Gearoid is poses for a phot not long after a riving in Scotland having kayaked from Belfast

On the biggest challenges he faced in preparing for this event he answered "it was figuring out how much gear to carry and trying out different foods at different stages to find out what worked best for me. Pacing was also a big challenge as there are times the hills are so steep you have to walk and also learning when to stop to eat and drink and being aware to not leave it too long" he said.

I asked Gearoid what the biggest difference was between road running and mountain running and he replied "The biggest differences are the small things you wouldn't think of, such as stopping to sterilise water, as you obviously can't carry all the water that you will take into your system over the course of 9 hours. Also, in a 10km road race you have a fairly good idea of the terrain you face and how you should feel at each different stage of it, as opposed to the unpredictability of a mountain, with the terrain and weather changes at different altitudes".

Gearoid placed 17th out of 200 entrants and completed the race in 9 hours.

When I asked him about his next endeavour, he said he has nothing definite planned, but grinned, and said, "Who knows? Maybe a paddle to Wales."

Following this interview Gearoid announced a plan to row across the Atlantic in 2022. Follow it on instagram [@row.hard.or.go.home](https://www.instagram.com/@row.hard.or.go.home)



Gearoid at the summit of Mt Toubkal, highest in Atlas Mountain range, north Africa

# ARW MALI

By Member of ARW Photos by ARW



On the 01 January 2021, Ireland took its non-permanent member seat on the United Nations Security Council for the next two years. The United Nations has been a cornerstone of Ireland's global engagement since 1955. The principles and values enshrined in the UN Charter are those Ireland has always striven to promote and protect. Ireland has been one of the strongest and most consistent supporters of the three pillars of the UN's work: peace and security, development and human rights.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established by Security Council resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013 to support political processes in Mali and carry out a number of security-related tasks. The Mission was asked to support the transitional authorities of Mali in the stabilisation of the country and implementation of the transitional roadmap. By unanimously adopting resolution 2164 of 25 June 2014, the Council further decided that the Mission should focus on duties, such as ensuring security, stabilisation and protection of civilians; supporting national political dialogue and reconciliation; and assisting the reestablishment of State authority, the rebuilding of the security sector, and the promotion and protection of human rights in that country.

Under the terms of the most recent renewal of the resolution

(Resolution 2531 – 2020), the mission supports the political process and carries out a number of security-related stabilisation tasks, with a focus on major population centres and lines of communication, protecting civilians, human rights monitoring, the creation of conditions for the provision of humanitarian assistance and the return of displaced persons, the extension of State authority and the preparation of free, inclusive and peaceful elections.

In early September 2019, the Defence Forces deployed a contingent of special operations forces (SOF) personnel as part of the German-led Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Task Force (ISR TF) located in Sector East, MINUSMA. These personnel, drawn from the Army Ranger Wing, along with other personnel from Germany, Belgium, Lithuania, Switzerland, Estonia, Czech Republic and Romania are located at Camp Castor in Gao (North Eastern Mali).



In addition, a small number of Defence Forces personnel have taken up positions in the MINUSMA Force Headquarters in Bamako.



A mobile ARW patrol travels through the vast desert landscape of Mali

The role of the ARW team within the ISR TF is to support the collection of information within the operational environment for the accurate development, decision and implementation of mandate activities. Irish Special Operation Forces (SOF) personnel play a key role within the ISR TF, utilising niche capabilities and drawing on expertise gained from previous overseas missions, such as East Timor, Liberia and Chad. Their role involves the conduct of patrols throughout Sector East in an effort to collect information from the local population.



Members of the ARW being heli'd out to an undisclosed location to carry out a foot patrol

ARW patrols are typically conducted in German Mowag Eagle vehicles, however heliborne patrols are also conducted, with the team deploying on foot when they arrive at their destination. The duration of the patrols can be from a few hours to up to ten days and cover distances of up to 150km from the base. Each SOF operator will carry a primary weapon, usually HK 416 or FN Minimi, and a secondary weapon, SIG P226. In addition, all operators wear Combat Body Armour and helmet, and carry personal communication and navigation devices, Individual First Aid Kit (IFAK) and Binocular Night Vision Devices (BNVD). SOF operators within the patrol will each have a specific role, including



ARW members donning NVE (Night Vision Equipment) at dusk

driver, medic, signaller or sniper, and will carry additional role specific equipment as required.

Given the vast and expansive terrain in Northern Mali, the patrol can be required to drive up to ten hours a day to access remote villages. The terrain is a mix of soft desert sand, sparse forests and razor sharp rocks, which have to be traversed carefully in order to prevent bogging of the vehicle or tyre punctures. The wet season (June to September) presents further challenges, as much of the ground is too soft to be driven in armoured vehicles. The soaring temperatures, which can rise above 50°C, also cause serious degradation on the operators.

Patrols utilise a combination of reconnaissance and surveillance, as well as interaction with the local population in order to gain the information required. This information is reported back through the German ISR TF and helps the MINUSMA Force Commander to make accurate decisions regarding the implementation of mandate activities. While the environment is challenging, the situation volatile and the threat of attack from terrorist armed groups is ever present, the ARW team utilise their specialist training and equipment, as well as their previous operational experience to reduce the risk where possible and carry out their assigned tasks.



An ARW member watches on as a Heli lands in preparation for their extraction

# HEADSPACE & TIMING

By Lt Col John Martin, OIC DF PSS

Modern life is complicated! It has its stresses and its pressures and we all need to be on top of our game to get through it. This is all the more true when we add in the extra ingredient of service in the Defence Forces. Regular overseas deployments, a highly flexible working routine, exacting training environments and operating in a team with the highest of professional standards all place demands on our personnel and on their families. The good news is that the Defence Forces provides support to help us to mitigate some of the effects and to ensure that while service in the Defence Forces may be demanding, it is also enjoyable, satisfying and rewarding. One of the principle supports available is the Personnel Support Service (PSS).

The Defence Forces Personnel Support Service is very familiar to all serving members of the Defence Forces and their families. Our mission is to provide support to all military personnel and their families equally and without regard to rank, length of service, formation or geographical location. This includes our colleagues who are deployed overseas and especially their families. We also support civilian employees of the Defence Forces and provide a limited service to our veterans. We provide information across a wide variety of issues, including personal finances and pay, mental health and wellbeing and general personal information.

The PSS team is a highly motivated and multi-disciplinary group of people who are available to support personnel across the country and overseas. Some of us are trained non-commissioned officers who fulfil the role of Barrack Personnel Support Officers (BPSSO), who bring a wealth of military knowledge and experience to complement their work. Some of us are also Occupational Social Workers (OSW), who bring an extra dimension of professionalism, experience and perspective which greatly enhances our ability to do our work in an effective manner. There is a PSS staff officer in each formation HQ in the Defence Forces.

The PSS provides standard employee assistance to all serving personnel. In addition we are responsible for delivering mental health and wellbeing training and education throughout the Defence Forces. We provide training interventions to deal with issues such as mental

resilience and coping with stress, and suicide prevention and awareness. This is a critically important part of our work and we cooperate with competent and trusted partner organisations to ensure that our work is effective. The National Office for Suicide Prevention provides us with valuable support in delivering interventions related to the prevention of suicide within the Defence Forces - while we work closely with Mental Health First Aid (Ireland) in delivering training to enhance the awareness and confidence of personnel in the area of mental health and wellbeing.

The PSS team is also concerned with how we manage critical incidents, both in terms of preparing our personnel to respond, and in helping people deal with the aftermath of a critical incident, either at home or overseas.

These are just some of the things that PSS do to support military personnel. Over the next few issues of CONNECT Magazine we will explore some of the aspects of the work of PSS throughout the Defence Forces. We will hear from one of our social workers and from one of our BPSSOs. We will look at personal finances and at mental health and wellbeing, and at how the PSS provides one-on-one confidential support as well as group training and information sharing. We will check in with our BPSSO deployed currently to UNIFIL to examine some of the issues associated with deployment and how we help our personnel and their families to deal with them.

Please note that PSS services are delivered to military personnel and their families confidentially!





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