From ‘Bulls' Wool’ to ‘Forty Hits’: The legacy of participation in the United Nations Operation in the Congo within the Defence Forces

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Introduction

The fifth contingent of Irish troops to serve in the Congo arrived in the country in extraordinary circumstances. The troops of the 36th Battalion flew into Elizabethville, the capital of the Katanga province, in Unites States Air Force Globemaster aircraft beginning on the 5th of December 1961. They arrived in the middle of a battle. As the first aircraft flew into Elizabethville airport to land, they were fired on by Katangan heavy machine guns, small arms, and anti-aircraft guns. One plane carrying forty-six troops sustained over forty direct hits, had two fuel tanks punctured, and very nearly caught fire in the air. The USAF crew was reported to have remarked upon landing that flying into Elizabethville airport “wasn’t just war but suicide.”[1] The men of the 36th Battalion, however, were well-prepared. Flying into Elizabethville in full combat gear and tactical formation, the troops immediately went into action. Within a few hours the battalion was exchanging mortar fire with Katangan gendarmerie, rooting out enemy snipers, reinforcing positions at the Irish base on the outskirts of the city, and had sustained its first fatality.[2] After less than two weeks on the ground, the 36th Battalion conducted the Irish Defence Forces’ first full battalion attack since the Civil War. The contrast between this arrival and that of the first contingent of Irish troops to serve in the Congo could not have been greater. When the men of the 32nd Battalion landed in the Congo just seventeen months previously in July 1960, they did so in chaotic fashion. Troops arrived carrying their weapons with no ammunition. Most of their equipment was on a separate aircraft which arrived before them and was immediately seized by local Congolese troops. The majority of officers flew on the same aircraft, and troops did not arrive in the tactical formation of their units.[3] Most memorably, the soldiers wore heavy ‘bulls' wool’ uniforms despite the tropical climate.

[1] 36th Battalion Unit History, Military Archives, p. 3.
[2] Ibid, pp. 4-6.
[3] 32nd Battalion Unit History, Military Archives, pp. 10-11.

The disparity between these two deployments is symbolic of the transformation of the Defence Forces which occurred as a result of participation in ONUC. It is the story of how this transformation came about, what exactly it involved, and the question of how it changed the wider role of the Defence Forces, which will be the focus of this paper.

ONUC was the state's first major United Nations peacekeeping commitment. It has the highest casualty rate of any DF overseas mission, and it quickly spiralled into a small conventional war. Unsurprisingly therefore, it has received significant academic attention in recent years. This attention almost universally focuses on the specific events Irish troops were involved in, such as the Niemba Ambush and the Battle of Jadotville, and how these events fit into the wider context of the UN's efforts in the Congo and the Cold War. This paper will not follow such a focus. Instead, it will seek to assess the legacy of Ireland's involvement in ONUC within the DF itself, and how it changed the long-term strategic posture of the force.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first section assesses how the practical operational experiences gained in the Congo changed Defence Forces equipment and organization. This section very much represents the nuts and bolts of the Congo's legacy within the DF. It will also seek to determine whether the changes made can be labelled as a full-scale modernization programme or not. The second part of the paper will investigate how the Congo experience altered the tactics, training, and general outlook of the DF. It is important to emphasise that in both sections the impact of ONUC on the DF will be shown through a tripartite mixture of changes Irish contingents implemented while still in the Congo, those that were pursued at home, and those which can be seen in Cyprus.

The historiography of Ireland's role in the Congo is extensive. It is almost non-existent for the Defence Force's involvement in Cyprus. The release of all official Government and DF documents relating to the state's role in ONUC under the 'thirty-year rule' has sparked a substantial number of publications on the subject over the last two decades. There are a great many specific studies of some of the DFs most famous engagements in the Congo, from Rose Doyle's *Heroes of Jadotville* to Dan Harvey's *Into Action*. Added to this literature are a wealth of academic articles detailing specific aspects of the Congo mission. Many of these articles were written by people who were directly involved in the state's engagement in the Congo. These include ONUC veterans such as Sean McKeown and Art Magennis, and former diplomats Noel Dorr and Conor Cruise O'Brien. This of course presents us

with the challenge of distinguishing objective retrospective analysis from first-hand narrative. Overviews of the ONUC mission as a whole and narrative histories of all UN peacekeeping missions also provide smaller accounts of the role of Irish troops. The most comprehensive overview of Ireland's military and diplomatic involvement in the Congo, and one which places it in an international context, is historian Michael Kennedy's book *Ireland, the United Nations and the Congo*. However, when it comes to assessing the legacy of this involvement within Ireland's defence apparatus the literature is very limited. Besides some small assessments in DF publications mainly focusing specifically on the effect of the Niemba Ambush, the only academic work is an article by former DF officer Declan Power in the *Defence Forces Review*. Some academics such as Kennedy and Eunan O'Halpin do offer analysis of the Congo's legacy, but only very briefly. Equally, Ireland's role in UNFICYP in Cyprus has received very little academic attention. The most extensive attention to Cyprus is provided by a chapter in Katsumi Ishizuka's book *Ireland and International Peacekeeping Operations, 1960-2000*. However, this primarily only examines how and why the Government and the Dail approved the Cyprus deployment in 1964. This serious gap in the historiography suggests, therefore, that further research and analysis of this important subject is very much needed.

This paper will draw on new primary source research, as well as taking a fresh look at previously studied sources, to attempt to fill that gap in the historiography. The battalion reports of each Irish contingent to serve in the Congo and Cyprus, known as Unit Histories, are our main source for the Congo's legacy within the DF. The Unit Histories are excellent detailed accounts, but we must always be aware of their two key biases. The first is that they were compiled only by the officers of a battalion, and so the voices of rank-and-file troops and NCOs can sometimes be lost. Secondly, Unit Histories often avoid overt criticism of either the DF, or the Government. This is mainly a result of the DF's very strong tradition of not appearing political in any sense. Documents from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Dáil debates, media archives, and personal accounts from military and diplomatic veterans of the Congo will also help inform this paper. With the appointment last year of what is only the second independent review of the Defence Forces in over four decades, there has never been a more opportune time to assess the legacy of Ireland's first and most famous major peacekeeping operation. I sincerely hope this paper will go some way towards making that crucial evaluation.

Equipment and Organization

The most obvious and most immediate legacy of ONUC within the Defence Forces was the equipment and organizational changes it caused. The DF in the 1950s was characterized by chronic underinvestment, boredom, and major personnel shortages. By 1960, the size of the Permanent Defence Forces had shrunk to approximately 7,000 personnel, far below the required minimum peacetime strength.[4] Furthermore, there had been no significant equipment upgrade since the end of the Second World War. Congo tested the DF's equipment and organization like never before. While its organization largely held up, although some more niche adjustments were implemented, its equipment did not. The DF's equipment, namely its weaponry, was shown to be mostly out of date on both the level of personal equipment and larger weapons systems. This section will examine what those equipment shortfalls were, what organizational and equipment modifications were made, and whether the improvements made can be deemed a full-scale modernization programme or not.

Without doubt the Congo did spark a modernization of the Defence Forces' personal equipment and small arms. The first and most discernible example of such modernization was in the uniforms troops were issued. As a result of the twin effects of the speed of the formation of the first two battalions to serve in the Congo, and years of underfunding, the soldiers of the 32nd and 33rd Battalions were issued with winter Irish uniforms for their tour of duty. These were the notorious so-called 'bulls' wool' tunics which the soldiers wore when they departed Ireland in the summer of 1960. These uniforms were quickly abandoned by the troops once they arrived in the tropical Congo climate. Additionally, the first two battalions were not equipped with mosquito nets and were given winter leather boots.[5] Officers of the 32nd Battalion expected that ONUC would have stores of tropical uniforms, suitable boots, and mosquito nets but were surprised to discover when they arrived that ONUC had no such supplies.[6] In an extraordinary demonstration of just how desperate the uniform situation was, officers of the 32nd Battalion commandeered a local textile factory to produce tropical uniforms for the battalion.[7] Clearly, the need for such tropical uniform was urgent. The Unit Histories of the 32nd and the 33rd Battalions,

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[4] Katsumi Ishizuka, *Ireland and International Peacekeeping Operations, 1960-2000*, (London, 2004), p. 36.
[5] 32nd Battalion Unit History, Military Archives, p. 7.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid, pp. 62-63.

the first two Congo contingents, regularly record incidents of troops collapsing from heat exhaustion while on patrol. However, as local factories were only able to produce cotton shorts and trousers, Indian bush shirts had to be supplied from the UN.[8] This led to soldiers wearing a dishevelled collection of different pieces of uniform. As this uniform was pieced together from three different sources, replacement uniforms were in short supply. Footage of the first troops in the Congo shows soldiers wearing an embarrassing mixture of different clothing, all in an extremely worn-down condition.[9] Eventually, this situation was rectified and a national tropical uniform was developed. Other personal equipment improvements were also made such as the provision of more suitable boots, and better vests for carrying ammunition. Footage of the last full battalion to deploy to the Congo shows just how great this improvement in uniform and personal equipment was with soldiers appearing professional and modern.[10]

The second major equipment improvement the Congo sparked was the upgrade of the Defence Forces' general service rifle. In 1960, the general service rifle of the Army was still the Second World War-era bolt-action Lee-Enfield rifle. The Unit History of the 32nd Battalion stated that the Lee-Enfield was "inadequate for the conditions of modern warfare", and that most potentially hostile forces Irish troops were likely to fight were equipped with standard NATO FN rifles.[11] The Government and the DF quickly realised how inadequate the Lee-Enfield was and in early 1961 the Belgium-manufactured FN rifle replaced the Lee-Enfield as the Army's general service rifle. The Niemba Ambush also showed that more Gustav sub-machine guns needed to be issued to contingents serving in the Congo, and this lesson was applied after Niemba. Other new small arms purchases were also made in 1961, such as the procurement of the 84mm anti-tank gun.[12] However, some serious equipment shortfalls were not rectified. Radio equipment remained out of date and inadequate for the large distances of the Congo. There was no upgrade of the Army's basic radio and communications equipment while Irish soldiers were serving with ONUC. This hampered troops in their operations. The most serious example of this was

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[8] Brig-Gen. P.D. Hogan, 'The Scars of Niemba', in David O'Donoghue (ed.), *The Irish Army in the Congo 1960-1964*, (Dublin, 2006), pp. 55-56.
[9] RTE Archives: 'Soldiers of the 33rd Battalion Depart for the Congo 1960', (https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1916-amateur-films/486186-33rd-battalion-depart-for-the-congo/), [accessed: 24th March 2021].
[10] RTE Archives: '38th Battalion Congo Bound', (https://www.rte.ie/archives/2017/1107/918197-irish-troops-leave-for-congo/), [accessed: 24th March 2021].
[11] 32nd Battalion Unit History, p. 64.
[12] Michael Kennedy and Art Magennis, *Ireland, the United Nations and the Congo*, (Dublin, 2014), p. 218.

when local communications equipment completely failed during the 36th Battalion's assault on the tunnel in Elizabethville during Operation 'Unokat' in December 1961.[13] This meant that for most of the Army's only full-battalion attack since the Civil War, units were unable to communicate with each other over radio. It is important also to note that while the Army's principle armoured car was upgraded as a result of experience in the Congo, which will be discussed shortly, this did not occur until after the DF's involvement with ONUC had ended. Given Irish cavalry troops were forced to engage in street battles with Katangan armoured cars far superior to their own, this upgrade would have been far more beneficial had it been made while troops were still serving with ONUC.

The Congo experience caused the Defence Forces to develop new organizational structures and practices to deploy troops overseas. There are two key specific examples. The first was the development of advance parties that deployed ahead of the main body of troops. Their role was to gather information on the situation in the contingent's area of operations, liaise with locals and the mission's headquarters, and make preparations for the arrival of the main body of troops. These advance parties became more sophisticated and competent over time. When the 32nd and 33rd Battalions deployed to the Congo "briefing on the situation in the proposed area of deployment was non-existent."[14] As the Chief of Staff of the DF at the time Lt-Gen. Sean McKeown later admitted, this was because no one in the DF or the Government had any reliable information on the situation in the Congo.[15] The advance party was tiny, consisting of just a handful of officers and NCOs.[16] The need for larger advance parties and far better briefing was clearly learnt four years later when the first battalion of Irish troops deployed to Cyprus. When the 40th Battalion deployed to Cyprus in 1964, the battalion first despatched a small reconnaissance party of officers and NCOs to gather information on the situation in their proposed area of operations.[17] This group then returned to Ireland and was able to brief extensively both a large advance party and the main body of troops on the situation in Cyprus. The large advance party then deployed and built the camp Irish troops would be based in. All officers of the battalion then received further extensive briefing on their area of operations, and

[13] 36th Battalion Unit History, Military Archives, pp. 76-77.
[14] 32nd Battalion Unit History, p. 7.
[15] Sean McKeown, 'The Congo (ONUC): the military perspective', in *The Irish Sword*, Vol. 20, No. 79, (Summer, 1996), p. 44.
[16] 32nd Battalion Unit History, p. 130.
[17] 40th Battalion Unit History, Military Archives, pp. 9-10.

were kept up to date on any changes in the situation on the ground by the advance party.[18] This system of advance parties and briefings was highly successful in Cyprus and so remains in place to this day. It was born out of the hard lesson learnt in the Niemba Ambush that poor preparation and little to no briefing could help lead to tragic loss of life.

The other significant organizational practice to be developed through the Congo experience was that all contingents for overseas peacekeeping duty would be newly created national units composed of troops who had volunteered for that specific mission. Rather than following the easier and more internationally common practice of simply deploying entire home units abroad, the DF decided to form an entirely new battalion composed of troops from across the Army for service in the Congo. It is not entirely clear why such a procedure was followed. However, it is likely that this decision was made due to the DF's expectation that the Congo deployment would be a once off mission, and its desire therefore to give as broad a sway of the Army experience in active-duty operations as possible. The 32nd and 33rd Battalions were formed, therefore, by each of the Army's three brigades contributing one infantry company, and DF headquarters contributing the headquarters and logistics company.[19] This practice was found to be largely successful, and as a result it remains the method of forming Irish contingents for overseas service. In fact, since the Congo there has only been one overseas mission the DF has contributed to in which conventional home units rather than new national units were deployed. This was the mission to East Timor from 1999 to 2004. The practice was also established during the ONUC mission of selecting troops to serve overseas on a voluntary basis. The first two Congo battalions were formed by each DF brigade being given a quota of personnel needed from each corps (infantry, cavalry, artillery etc) to form the company from their brigade. Troops from each corps volunteered to serve in the unit, and as the number of volunteers for the Congo mission far exceeded the quota, officers in DF headquarters then hand-picked the troops who would deploy.[20] This practice appears to have arisen from two sources. The first was that the DF was unsure what the demand would be amongst personnel for overseas service. The second was a political desire from the Government and the Dail for personnel to have volunteered to serve with ONUC specifically. This was desired because TDs believed that should there be casualties, they would be more

[18] Ibid, pp. 11-12.
[19] McKeown, 'The Congo', p. 44.
[20] Ibid.

acceptable if no soldier had been forced to serve on the mission. The Dáil's debate on the Congo deployment reveals this desire clearly as both opposition and Government TDs stressed that all the troops deploying had volunteered for the mission.[21] Again, this system proved successful as the demand for overseas service within the DF was staggering. Almost the entire Army volunteered for the first battalion.[22] With such a high demand, a volunteer system was retained for all subsequent Congo battalions. The first contingent to deploy to Cyprus was also formed on a volunteer basis and once again nearly the entire DF volunteered.[23] This showed that overseas service remained highly attractive to DF personnel despite the dangers that the Congo experience had made apparent, and so to this day all DF overseas contingents continue to be formed by troops volunteering to join the unit.

While a somewhat haphazard modernization programme of small arms and personal equipment did ultimately take place in the DF due to the Congo, no such programme occurred on the level of larger weapons systems and capabilities. The one serious caveat to this is the replacement of the DF's main armoured car and infantry fighting vehicle. This took place in the spring of 1964 when the Army's inter-war-era Ford armoured cars were replaced with the state-of-the-art French-manufactured Panhard AML 60.[24] Undoubtedly, this was a major step-up for the Cavalry Corps. However, modernization did not occur beyond this. This is not to say that the experience of Irish troops in the Congo did not make apparent the serious need for such a full-scale modernization programme. For example, the commanding officer of the transport section of the 36th Battalion stated that "men's lives could have been lost due to the lack, and the unroadworthy condition of the transport available to us."[25] However, no replacement programme of the Army's transport trucks took place. The decision not to pursue a full-scale modernization programme of the DF's equipment capabilities was largely driven by a deeply rooted desire within the Government, and within the Department of Defence in particular, to spend as little as possible on the country's defence provisions. Therefore overall, the Congo experience sparked the modernization of the Defence Forces' small arms and personal equipment, while also creating a system for generating contingents to serve overseas.

[21] *Dáil Debates*, Vol. 183, 20th July 1960.
[22] Ibid.
[23] *Dáil Debates*, Vol. 208, 7th April 1964.
[24] Ralph A. Riccio, *AFVs in Irish Service since 1922*, (Warsaw, 2011), p. 62.
[25] 36th Battalion Unit History, p. 95.

However, ultimately as we will see in the next section, the bigger legacy of the Congo within the DF was not the equipment and organizational changes it wrought, but the improvements in the DF's tactical ability and overall orientation.

Tactics, Training, and Outlook

Service in the Congo transformed the outlook and operational effectiveness of the Defence Forces. Prior to the Congo, the entire orientation of the DF was solely towards internal security and territorial defence. Before the decision to send a battalion of troops to the Congo, the only consideration of sending conventional troops abroad was made in one small report by the Army's intelligence section G2. The report concluded that the most the Army could send on such a deployment would be an enlarged company of 250 to 300 troops.[26] However, by August 1960 there were over 1,300 Irish troops in the Congo, representing as much as 20% of the entire DF.[27] Within quite literally a matter of weeks the whole orientation of the DF had changed. The same transformation occurred in the operational effectiveness of the Irish military. Besides a very small number of officers who had some experience in the Civil War or in the British Army, all of the troops who deployed to the Congo had no experience of combat or active operations of any kind. ONUC suddenly thrust the DF into not only active operations, but intense combat of both a defensive and offensive nature, and all in a new multinational framework. This caused an immense improvement in the DF's operational abilities. This section will demonstrate this conversion by examining the specialized skills the DF developed expertise in as a result of experience in the Congo, and the tactical and training reforms which were implemented. It will conclude by assessing how the Congo shifted the DF's overall outlook.

The combat experience Irish troops gained in the Congo caused the DF to develop expertise in several military skills. Here we will examine four of these skills. The first was reconnaissance. One of the responsibilities Irish troops had in Elizabethville was the defence of the city's airport. Soldiers quickly realised that Katangan gendarmerie were spying on their activities by setting up listening posts and reconnaissance patrols on the outskirts of the airport. To counteract this activity, Irish troops began to set up listening posts and conduct reconnaissance patrols of their own.[28] Irish Battalions evidently proved

[26] Ishizuka, *Ireland and International*, p. 21.
[27] Ibid, pp. 36-37.
[28] 35th Battalion Unit History, Military Archives, pp. 13-15.

quite capable in these reconnaissance skills because the airport was successfully defended, and intelligence gathered by troops through patrols and listening posts proved very useful in the successful execution of Operation 'Rumpunch' in August 1961.[29] As Elizabethville airport was effectively a constant source of struggle with Katangan gendarmerie for over a year, three different Irish battalions had direct experience using these skills. Operations 'Morthor' and 'Unokat' also saw the Irish become particularly adept in cavalry reconnaissance. As the largest cavalry unit in Elizabethville, ONUC commanders frequently used Irish Ford armoured cars to conduct reconnaissance missions of enemy positions.[30] Cavalry reconnaissance skills were further developed during Operation 'Grandslam' in December 1962 and January 1963. During Operation 'Grandslam' an Irish armoured car section, larger than previous cavalry sections in the Congo, supported the offensive operations of Ethiopian and Indian troops by providing a mixture of reconnaissance and support fire.[31] It was also during urban operations in Elizabethville that Irish troops first began to develop their well-known expertise in bomb disposal. The Irish Battalion was the only ONUC contingent in Elizabethville with a considerable number of personnel with EOD training, and so Irish Ordnance Corps personnel were effectively given responsibility for all of ONUC's bomb disposal operations in the city.[32] These skills were then further developed in Cyprus where once again the Irish battalion led the UN mission's bomb disposal efforts.[33] The outbreak of the 'Troubles' in 1969 made these skills very useful and needed at home. Finally, an organized deliberate IED campaign against Irish troops deployed with UNIFIL in Lebanon in the 1980s caused the DF to develop what is regarded as one of the best sets of counter-IED and EOD skills in the world.[34]

It was also in the Congo that Irish troops first began to develop their expertise in sniping. The 36th Battalion pioneered the use of snipers to enhance force protection. During the 36th's tour of duty snipers were employed with great effect to protect the Irish base on the outskirts of Elizabethville, to identify enemy snipers, and to protect patrols.[35] Due to the success of this first organized use of snipers by the 36th Battalion, they remained

[29] Ibid, p. 14.
[30] Comdt. A.J. Magennis, 'Cavalry in the Congo and Cyprus', in *An Cosantoir*, (Jan. 1976), p. 26.
[31] 38th Battalion Unit History, Military Archives, pp. 3-4.
[32] Lt Col. Eoghan O'Neill, 'Plus Ca Change' in David O'Donoghue (ed.), *The Irish Army in the Congo 1960-1964*, (Dublin, 2006), 84-87.
[33] 40th Battalion Unit History, p. 15.
[34] Henry McDonald, *Irishbatt: The Story of Ireland's Blue Berets in the Lebanon*, (Dublin, 1993), pp. 111-123.
[35] 36th Battalion Unit History, pp. 5-7.

a key component of the force protection measures of all subsequent overseas contingents. Finally, the Congo experience taught the DF the importance of friendly and regular liaison with local civilians in peacekeeping missions. The application of this lesson was most seen in the UNFICYP mission in Cyprus. In Cyprus, the intelligence sections of Irish battalions were tasked with establishing close relations with local civilian leaders, and the main focus of Irish patrols was to keep good contact with these leaders.[36] Niemba undoubtedly enforced the lesson that failure to establish good contact with the local community from the beginning of a deployment, and to clearly articulate one's intentions, could have disastrous consequences. The extent of the Congo's legacy in developing niche capabilities that the DF was particularly skilled at is ultimately seen by the fact that these exact skills remain some of the key areas of expertise for today's Defence Forces. It is no coincidence that the DFs contribution to EU Battlegroups is a reconnaissance task force. Nor is it accidental that sniper teams from the Army have one of the best records of any armed forces in the world at the annual international sniper competition in Fort Bragg. Such is the reputation of the DF's EOD abilities that Irish EOD officers and NCOs were involved at the highest level in forming NATO's counter-IED policy in Afghanistan. Therefore, one can argue that it was in the Congo that the DF first began to find their niche. This is a legacy which can certainly be traced right to the present day.

Beyond the development of expertise in certain areas, the Congo sparked several major reforms in the Defence Forces' tactics and training. The two principal tactical lessons which the ONUC mission taught the DF was the importance of strong force protection, and good intelligence. The first two Congo battalions deployed to the country with light arms and poor force protection measures and equipment. The decision to lightly arm the first battalions was primarily a result of the UN's desire for ONUC to act more as a police force than a military force. The UN's formal request to the Irish Government to contribute a contingent to ONUC asked that Irish troops only be equipped with "light arms and supporting services."[37] The Government and the DF, in their inexperience, complied whole heartedly with this request. The result was that the 32nd and 33rd Battalions were not even equipped with armoured cars. The Government also wanted Irish troops to pursue a force protection policy of being as unthreatening as possible, and thereby reducing the

[36] 40th Battalion Unit History, pp. 125-126.
[37] NAI TSCH /3/S16137B, 'Memorandum for the Government by the Department of External Affairs', 18th July 1960, in Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh, Eunan O'Halpin, Kate O'Malley, and Bernadette Whelan (eds.), *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, Vol. XI, (Dublin, 2018).

desire of hostile forces to attack them.[38] The disaster of the Niemba Ambush in which nine Irish soldiers were killed, proved this policy to be completely ineffective. The legacy of Niemba, together with the dramatic transformation of ONUC over 1961 from a police force into a conventional military force on an offensive footing, provoked a complete reversal of this force protection policy. After the 33rd Battalion, each Irish Congo battalion became more heavily armed than the last. By the time of the 36th Battalion's deployment, the Irish contingent was not only equipped with armoured cars, but had also deployed an anti-aircraft battery, and a significant number of medium 81mm mortars and other support weapons.[39] The last full battalion to serve in the Congo was equipped with heavy 120mm mortars, and was supported by a large armoured car section of company level strength.[40] By the time of the Cyprus mission in 1964, the concern of deputies in the Dáil was that troops were not heavily armed enough. Fine Gael leader James Dillon stated that the first troops who went to the Congo were far too lightly armed.[41] Minister for External Affairs Frank Aiken responded by agreeing with Dillon, saying that after his visit to Irish troops in the Congo he instructed that future contingents should be "much more heavily equipped."[42] Indeed, it was the change in the DF's force protection approach that was the main reason the Government agreed to the purchase of the Panhard armoured cars in 1964. Essentially, the DF's force protection policy switched from one of appearing unthreatening to reduce attack, to one of deterrence through the visible deployment of superior firepower. Congo taught the DF and the Government that when it came to protecting its troops in a dangerous environment, the stick was every bit as important as the carrot.

The Congo experience also taught the DF the importance of good intelligence. ONUC battalions were frequently hindered by their lack of reliable intelligence, in contrast to Katangan forces who had a constant source of accurate information through Belgian settlers living in the country. The sum of ONUC and the Irish contingent's intelligence capabilities were unreliable rumours picked up from Baluba youths.[43] Only one

[38] NAI DFA /5/305/384/2/I, 'Memorandum by the Department of Foreign Affairs', 19th July 1960, in DIFP Vol. XI.
[39] NAI TSCH /3/S16137J/61, 'Department of Foreign Affairs Memorandum', 9th October 1961, in DIFP Vol. XI.
[40] 38th Battalion Unit History, pp. 1-3.
[41] *Dáil Debates*, Vol. 208, 7th April 1964.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Declan Power, 'Lessons from the Congo', in *Defence Forces Review* (2008), pp. 27-28.

intelligence officer from G2 was attached to Irish battalions in the Congo.[44] The Cyprus mission saw a complete change in this situation. An entire intelligence section was attached to each Irish battalion deployed with UNFICYP.[45] These sections worked meticulously to establish contact with local community leaders, write daily intelligence reports, compile lists of the leadership of armed factions, and monitor closely any hostile activity.[46] The DF found their basic training regime to be largely effective through the Congo experience. However, one significant training reform was the introduction of longer and more sophisticated pre-deployment training for contingents preparing to travel overseas.[47] Pre-deployment training was intended to be specially tailored to the likely scenarios troops would find themselves in on the specific mission they were deploying to. It was also meant to focus on non-military skills troops would not be taught in conventional training but which were very useful in peacekeeping, such as making arrests.[48]

Congo professionalised the Defence Forces and transformed its outlook. In four short years the DF converted from a semi-professional, unmotivated, inexperienced force focused on territorial defence, to a professional, motivated, experienced force orientated almost entirely towards overseas peacekeeping operations. Leadership standards improved vastly. Personal equipment and small arms were modernized. Expertise was developed in a number of essential and specialized military skills. Experience of serious combat of both a defensive and offensive nature boosted the confidence and capability of all ranks. DF contingents had gone from landing their troops on one aircraft and their weapons and equipment on another, to having their heavy mortar troops airlifted into position by helicopters to provide support fire to an entire brigade.[49] To summarize, as a result of service in the Congo the Defence Forces implemented sweeping changes over what they had responsibility for.

Conclusion

After the end of the Defence Forces' involvement in the Congo in 1964, no comprehensive assessment of the lessons both the DF and the Government needed to learn was

[44] NAI DFA /5/305/384/2/III, 'Exchange of Minutes', 14th to 28th February 1961, in DIFP Vol. XI.
[45] 40th Battalion Unit History, p. 125.
[46] Ibid.
[47] 35th Battalion Unit History, pp. 48-49.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Armed Forces of the Indian Union, *The Congo Operation 1960-1963*, (Delhi, 1976), pp. 129-130.

undertaken. This paper has attempted to partially rectify that shortfall. The key reason for undertaking such an attempt is to improve our understanding of how both the DF and Irish defence policy came to be what they are today. It is of particular importance right now with the establishment of the Commission on the Defence Forces whose aim it is to issue a comprehensive report on the DF's future needs and orientation.

The four years of the ONUC mission witnessed the professionalization of the DF. It may not on the surface seem that transformational that by December 1961 the DF could instruct its troops to wear full combat gear as they flew into a war. However, this transformation must be seen in its context. The DF of the 1950s was effectively a semi-professional force. Its soldiers were poorly paid, unmotivated, equipped with completely out-of-date weaponry, and most importantly, incapable of executing many key military operations. The change that came out of the Congo was not only that troops wore the right uniforms and carried the right weapons, or that the DF procured these, but that the DF became operationally capable. By the end of the ONUC mission, the DF were capable of successfully executing major offensive and defensive operations in challenging urban and rural environments. This was certainly not the case in 1960. Above all, the Congo gave the soldier of Óglaigh na hÉireann a sense of purpose and one which continues to this day. As the Unit History of the first Congo Battalion wrote, the Congo gave the Defence Forces "a new lease of life."[50]

[50] 32nd Battalion Unit History, p. 135.

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