



Challenge, Change & Chad

An interview with Defence Forces Chief of Staff,
Lieutenant General Dermot Earley.

In the course of the Irish deployment on the peace-enforcement mission to Chad, Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Dermot Earley spoke to SIGNAL Magazine of the challenge such a deployment to a landlocked trouble spot in Africa represents for the Defence Forces. The deployment to the central African country, as part of the UN mandated and European Union (EU) led mission, has been widely debated and analysed by media commentators and the general public. Commanding the Defence Forces at such a time is the latest challenge facing General Earley during a distinguished military career that has spanned over forty years.

By Ruairi Kavanagh.

The challenge of the Chad mission, working under the EU flag in a remote and potentially dangerous mission, highlights the changing capabilities and operational challenges for the Defence Forces. Arising from what might appear to an outsider as almost two decades of continuous and significant reviews and restructuring, coupled with radical change in the international security and defence environment over the past seven years, the Defence Forces is, today, a vastly changed organisation. The Chief admits that for officers, serving during periods of profound change, dealing with this evolution is not always easy. "It is natural for all change to be resisted in some way, but I believe that the majority of changes within the Defence Forces have been for the betterment of both the organisation and the individuals within it."

The external drivers for change are currently the most relevant. Working within a European Security Defence Policy (ESDP), under a NATO flag in Kosovo and Afghanistan, under the EU flag in Chad and the UN flag in the Middle-East, have presented doctrinal changes for the organisation. "These external drivers for change have meant that officers have been presented with a more internationally focused range of challenges and changes in military doctrine and training to which they must now measure up. They have succeeded in this very swiftly and very efficiently and as we have progressed it has become apparent that change is more of an ongoing process, but our standards of basic military education and our formal career courses have meant that we can hold our own at any level internationally in the midst of this change."

The process of transformation, compounded by a reduction in troop numbers and barrack closures, has nevertheless moved quite swiftly in Gen Earley's opinion. "These periods of concurrent change have proved that our people can cope admirably and are not afraid of the challenges currently in process, or of what the future will bring. There is an enthusiasm and desire, particularly amongst our younger officers, to take things to the next level."

Maintaining Momentum

Gen Earley maintains that with a budget of less than 0.7% of GDP (European norm is 2.5 - 4%), the Defence Forces provides consistently good value for the taxpayer. "It has been well managed and the delegation of financial resources to the Defence Forces has worked out well. Overall, value for money continues to be achieved by the organisation. We are lucky to have people who understand and who are committed to doing the very best that they can with the resources available."

Gauging the morale of the Defence Forces at present, General Earley assesses it as consistently rising, but there is not total

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satisfaction yet. "I think the reason that it is not as high as possible yet is that we are not presenting to our officers the challenges which they are seeking quickly enough."

The role of operational capabilities in terms of boosting morale is just one part of a constantly evolving strategy, part of which also includes the 2010 White Paper and the recently published Defence Strategy Statement 2008 - 2010.

There is also the role of the Chief himself in moving the organisation forward. What does General Earley see as his major task during the three years ahead? "Whatever strategies are put in place, whatever strategy documents are agreed, if people don't feel that the work they are doing is valued then morale will suffer. We must appreciate the effort that our people make in the course of their work. I don't like just thinking on a strategic level, I'm also focussed on ensuring that our personnel can get on with completing the task in hand and that the right leadership is in place to take the organisation forward, and we must not get bogged down in the minutiae of management."

Recently, Defence Minister Willie O'Dea went on record saying that the Defence Forces is in need of a period of 'stability'. While stability in terms of the composition and size of the organisation is welcome, officers in the Defence Forces are acutely aware of the need for constant re-evaluation in terms of equipment.

"While there have been massive advances in terms of equipment, we are cognisant of the need to ensure that old equipment is updated or replaced and that our troops are safe and secure when undertaking tasks at home and abroad and that requires the best available equipment. I think, at present,

Left: Lt Gen Dermot Earley at Nordic Battlegroup exercises in Sweden.

Irish soldiers prepare weapons at Camp Ciara, Chad.



we are doing the right thing in terms of equipment, at the right level. However, we do want to develop our capability and that should drive requirements in terms of equipment and technology.”

In terms of developing capabilities, the fact that Irish troops are operating under a NATO flag in Kosovo and under an EU flag on a United Nations Chapter 7 peace-enforcement mission in Chad is quite a radical change from the more static large scale deployments of the past, such as the Lebanon commitment with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). “I don’t think the UNIFIL style deployment is productive in today’s environment, so I don’t think we’ll be committing to that sort of mission for the foreseeable future. We need to ensure that we are more flexible, fluid and mobile in terms of our deployments. We will do our job well in every theatre and hand over a more peaceful and stable environment to our successors - that’s why a UN mandate is so important in terms of securing the international support that is vital in ensuring that our efforts do make a difference in some of the difficult and troubled countries in which we serve. The

UN has had its critics, especially in recent years, but it is the only international forum we have and we need to respect that. Only with UN backing can countries be guaranteed the sort of humanitarian support and international aid that conflict zones desperately need in order to recover. Otherwise there is a vacuum and that is dangerous. Peace without subsequent development leads to stagnation.”

Deployment to Chad

The deployment to Chad ticks almost all the boxes in terms of operational challenges. The Irish area of operations (AOR) is in a very remote region of an extremely remote and under-developed nation in the centre of the world’s most troubled continent. The deployment of Irish troops there was not a decision taken lightly but now, with the logistics finally in place, the reality of having Irish troops on the ground in Chad, primarily at Goz Beida close to the Sudanese border, has finally come to pass. “It is a huge challenge, environmentally, logistically and operationally. In terms of logistics, just to get our people there is a significant undertaking. Then we are faced with the difficult environment on the ground, constructing our base from a ‘brown field’ site. Operationally we have to be strong, proficient and do the job properly. But we are well able for this mission. Planning, equipment and leadership is key and those key elements are in place. Leadership was a hugely important attribute in Liberia and we expect the same high levels in this mission. Liberia has helped us prepare for the challenges in Chad. Great challenges exist in Chad, but I have no doubt that we will be able to fulfil our roles, which are to provide security for refugee and displaced persons camps and to support the UN humanitarian operation that is in place.”

There has been reported rhetoric from some of the many warring factions in Chad that the Irish will be seen as a 'hostile' force, resulting from the fact that Irish soldiers will be working in the same mission as the former Chadian colonial power France, whom rebels claim are supporting the beleaguered President Idriss Deby in N'Djamena. "We are not seeking confrontation with anybody, we are there to get on with our job unless somebody has a serious problem with us that threatens our troops and prevents us from carrying out our mission. We will use whatever methods we need to in that situation. It may be negotiation, it may be verbal confrontation, it may be a show of force and of course, ultimately, it can be a lot more than that, up to lethal force if required. We need to be able to deal with the threat if it presents itself. We will minimise the risk, but we accept the risk. The soldiers know that and our training conditions them for it."

General Earley is keen not to appear daunted by the task ahead in Chad. "On the contrary, I am enthused by what we can achieve on this operation. I visited Chad last week with the Minister and we were hugely impressed by what we saw. The Irish are there to help and we are there to make a positive impact."

The sheer magnitude of transporting the vast array of vital equipment which the Irish contingent need to bring to this remote region of Chad by air, land and sea required detailed and precise planning and preparation and, consequently, a large financial commitment. Unlike traditional United Nations blue beret peacekeeping missions, in which the UN supported much of the financial costs of nations contributing to a mission, EU led missions, even when they operate under a

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UN mandate, function on a costs lie where they fall basis. "There is a significant cost involved and we have had the backing from Minister O'Dea to secure the necessary funding, which ensures that we can do this job to the best of our ability. This is an expensive undertaking, but if you were to ask the Irish taxpayer where in the world should Irish troops be going to help, the vast majority would say the Darfur, region. We can't get into Darfur, but Chad is the next best thing. We will help to protect the displaced population of Chad and the refugees from Darfur."

The Irish troops deployed in Chad have undergone a significant period of pre-deployment training covering all types of scenarios that could be expected or envisioned. This included training on the cultural,

ethnic and tribal realities of life of the local community at the Defence Forces Training

The Minister of Defence, Willie O'Dea TD, in conversation with Lt Gen Earley in Sweden.



Centre (DFTC) at the Curragh, to ensure that the best expertise, both nationally and internationally, is available. The mission to Chad will be unlike many others that the Defence Forces has undertaken. There will be precious few home comforts and there is no off-base recreation, as quite simply there is nowhere to go; no leave will be permitted over the period of any of the four-month deployments. "This is a tough mission. I expect downtime will consist primarily of eating, sleeping and preparation for the next mission, that's it and our soldiers know that" says General Earley. There are also questions over key facilities, such as being able to communicate with their families. "That has been put in place to the best of our ability, but we have to remember that where we are makes any sort of communication difficult. That said, we will put in place whatever is necessary." The comfort that the Chief does offer is that the tour of duty on the Chad mission is a contracted one, of four months, albeit an intense four months. "On return our soldiers will have a month's medical leave and whatever holidays they have accrued. We will be generous in that respect."

EU Nordic Battlegroup

The relatively recent commitment by the Defence Forces of an Improvised Explosive Devices Disposal (IEDD) element to the EU Nordic Battlegroup (NBG) drew the predictable response from those obsessed with a 'militarised' Europe. In reality, the NBG is a composite force from Ireland, Finland, Sweden and Estonia, which had a six-month period of 'operational readiness' from January to June of this year. General Earley feels that the NBG is just another outlet by which Irish troops can train, and possibly serve, on overseas duty.

"The problem was with the use of the word Battlegroup, which may have created the wrong impression among some. The mandate of the NBG is simple, that should there be an emergency within 6000km of Brussels and there are no other stabilising elements available or in place, this group of soldiers who are trained to work together can help, after a five day period to assemble and travel, for a short period of time. The key word here is help, that's what we want to. Like everything else we undertake, Ireland's participation in any theoretical deployment with the NBG is subject to the



Lt Gen Earley delivers a 'teamtalk' to troops at McKee Barracks prior to their deployment overseas.

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Domestic Concerns

The development of the unique assets that the Irish Defence Forces possesses is key to how the organisation can make a positive impact in both the international and national arenas. One of these is the United Nations Training School Ireland (UNTSI), something which General Earley has been involved with for many years. "It's a centre of excellence for leadership, with a very strong international reputation and I would like to expand that. We have broadened the training into areas such as cultural awareness to complement subjects such as the law of armed conflict and human rights. When you observe the School in action and understand its ethos, it is something that we can be very proud of."

The evolution and expansion of further learning within the ranks is something that has been well received across the Defence Forces.



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The changes include a system of university Level 8 graduate entrants into the Cadet School and the inclusion of an MA on Leadership, Management & Defence Studies on the mid-career Command & Staff (C&S) Course in conjunction with the National University of Ireland Maynooth [NUIM]. These are popular with officers, but is there a case for making courses such as the C&S mandatory? “I know I benefited greatly from this advanced education and I think there is a need for further formal continuous professional development and qualifications. It used to be degree level, now it’s accepted that MA Level is the standard, and I believe that there should also be some of our officers studying doctorates as part of their military education.”

The legal system within the Defence Forces has also been overhauled and is now generally accepted to be world class. “Society has changed and, like everyone else, soldiers expect fair treatment. I think the system we have put in place is the right way to go. It has the proper ratio of checks and balances. The Ombudsman for the Defence Forces is also a continuation of the process started by the Doyle Report in 2002, a process of change which the Defence Forces has embraced thoroughly.”

The Chief is primarily concerned that those under his command know and feel the true value of the work which they undertake while wearing the uniform of the Defence Forces. “Throughout my career I have felt that the work of every soldier and officer must be valued and recognised, the sacrifice that they make must never be under-estimated.”

**CAREER RESUMÉ:
Lieutenant General Dermot Earley**

Lieutenant General Dermot Earley was born in 1948 and joined the Defence Forces as a cadet in 1965. He was commissioned into the Infantry Corps in 1967. He completed the First Ranger Course in the Defence Forces, which led to the establishment of special operations training and the formation of the Army Ranger Wing (ARW). He also worked in Curragh Command Headquarters and the Defence Forces School of Physical Culture.

From 1983 to 1987 he was posted to Operations Section in the Chief of Staff’s Branch at Defence Forces Headquarters. On return from an overseas posting in

1991 he was appointed an instructor at the Command & Staff School of the Military College and in 1994 - 95 he helped establish the United Nations Training School Ireland (UNTSI) in the Military College.

On promotion to Lieutenant Colonel in 1995 he commanded the 27 Infantry Battalion in Dundalk and held further appointments as OIC Conciliation and Arbitration and OIC Public Relations at DFHQ. He was promoted to Colonel in 2001 and held the appointments of Director of Administration and Director of Human Resources Management, before being selected for promotion to Brigadier General in December 2003. General Earley was promoted to Major General in Feb 2004 and was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff (Support). On 28 June 2007 he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General

and appointed Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces. In terms of overseas service, Lieutenant General Earley served with UNTSO in the Middle East from 1975 to 1977 and was Adjutant of the 52 Infantry Battalion with UNIFIL (Lebanon) in 1982/83. From 1987 to 1991 he served as the Deputy Military Advisor to the Secretary General of the UN at UN Headquarters in New York. General Earley commanded the 81st Infantry Battalion with UNIFIL in 1997.

Lieutenant General Earley was educated at St. Nathy's College, Ballaghaderreen, Co. Roscommon. He completed a specialist Diploma Course, with distinction, in physical education at St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham in 1970 - 71. He is a graduate of the Command and Staff School and of the Royal College of Defence Studies, London (2001) and holds a Master of Arts (Hons) in Peace and Development Studies from the University of Limerick (1999). He is married to Mary and lives in Newbridge, County Kildare. They have six children.

Below: Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern with the Chief of Staff.

