

An Iraqi honour guard marching past the mausoleum of the unknown soldier in Baghdad.



Comdt John Hamill took time out to talk to SIGNAL while on a short break home from a UNIKOM posting in Iraq as the volatile region faces an unpredictable future. He also analyses current overseas operations and the nature of Irish neutrality. By Máirtín Breathnach.

Comdt John Hamill has served in the Defence Forces for over 30 years, his overseas career starting in 1978 in Lebanon with the heavy mortar troop for the Irish UNIFIL battalion. He completed five tours of duty in Lebanon and returned there early this year to assist in the winding up of the Irish involvement with UNIFIL. He has also served on two peacekeeping tours in the Balkans, one as a military observer in 1993-94, and again in 1998-99 with the European Community Monitoring Mission. Since July 2002, he has been serving with the United Nations Iraq Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM).

Could you tell us about your current posting in UNIKOM?

“At present I am actually stationed in Iraq, near the Kuwaiti border. I am located in Mission HQ, in the Operations Cell, having served over three months in a Patrol and Observation Base (POB), in the Iraqi desert. Our mission is deployed in the demilitarised zone (DMZ) between Iraq and Kuwait. The DMZ extends along the length of the frontier, and is five kilometres wide on the Kuwaiti side, and ten kilometres wide on the Iraqi side. The Irish currently have five personnel serving on the Iraqi side and one on the Kuwaiti side. The majority of bases, and

the headquarters, are on the Iraqi side, covering from the Arabian or Persian Gulf (depending on who you are talking to) to the Saudi border. The Iraq-Kuwait border was delineated by the UN in 1993. Effectively we're stationed in the desert, far from any signs of human habitation. Once a month we may travel to Kuwait City to buy supplies for our POB, which is a prefab settlement where we live. Most of these bases have seven UN observers, all of different nationalities. Some of the bases have medical facilities, including an ambulance, for staff or local casualties. For example mine or cluster grenade explosions are common occurrences, as there has been a large amount of unexploded ordnance left



Map of Kuwait showing the Iraqi and Saudi borders.

since the Second Gulf War. The First Gulf War, which many people seem to forget, was of course the extremely bloody conflict between Iran and Iraq which lasted eight years, 1980-88. We also provide normal medical assistance on a regular basis to civil-

ians who turn up at the gate. This helps to foster a good relationship with the locals,”

What is the Irish connection?

“We are there because the UN set up a peacekeeping mission directly after the Second Gulf War and asked for states, including Ireland, to provide peacekeeping volunteers. Ireland has a long history of providing both armed and unarmed personnel for these missions. I think we originally had ten observers, a figure which has decreased over recent years. Presently there are six. We’ve been there constantly since the end of the war. In 2000/2001 the force commander in the area was Irish, Major General Johnny Vize, who concluded his term last November. We’re spread throughout three sectors, on both sides of the line between Iraq and Kuwait. These sectors are known as North (centre and east), South (south and west) and Maritime is obviously on the waterways. Interestingly, this was the first, and as far as I am aware the only, UN Mission where the five permanent members

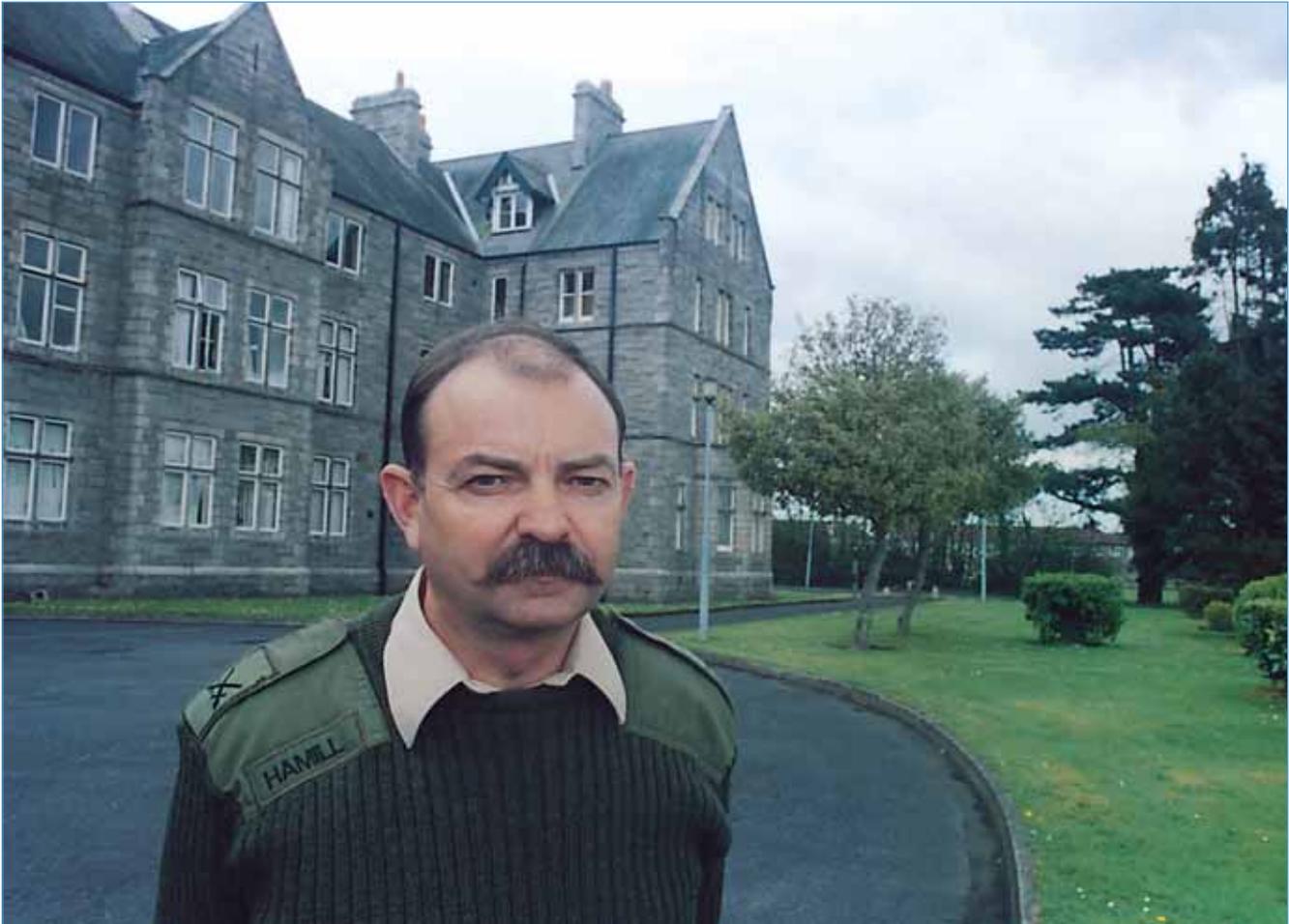
of the Security Council have UNMOs - each has eleven, with a key appointment permanently allocated for their National Senior, who is in each case a Colonel.

How difficult does the language barrier prove?

“In the Mission itself, the official working language is English, so we are very fortunate in that respect. In Kuwait City, in all the shops, English is spoken. The majority of the inhabitants are non-Kuwaiti, and there is a large service sector manned by Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, all of whom speak at least some English. It is more difficult on the Iraqi side, though their liaison officers speak perfect English. We don’t have an interpreter in the POBs, though, so communication to a large degree depends on hand signals. There is one translator in HQ, oddly enough a German. Arabic is a very difficult language to learn. Personally I have enough to get by, but not a massive amount. I think that with patience, empathy and goodwill, communication can be achieved.”



This picture from May 2000 shows a United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) personnel carrier driving by a picture of late Hezbollah leader Sheikh Abbas al-Mussawi in the village of Ghanduriyeh in south Lebanon.



Comdt John Hamill: "It should be noted that in most missions, this one included, Irish officers are sought after for posts of responsibility."

Does experience help?

"Most of the personnel here would be on maybe their first or second UN mission. Therefore, the Irish have a great advantage in that there is a larger core of experience, as Irish officers generally have more overseas missions undertaken, and Irish Army officers are required to have served with at least one battalion before serving on an observer mission. It means that the learning curve tends to be not so steep. It should be noted that in most missions, this one included, Irish officers are sought after for posts of responsibility. Despite the small size of our Defence Forces in general, the Irish have given proportionately a large amount of Force Commanders to the UN, starting with Lt Gen Sean McEoin in the Congo, and including Maj Gen Jimmy Quinn in Cyprus, Bill Callaghan first in UNTSO, then in Lebanon, Jim Parker in India-Pakistan, and Johnny Vize in UNIKOM, as I already mentioned.

While the UN have rules as regarding the sharing out of appointments on a proportionate basis, it is interesting to note that the Force Commander in Lebanon specifically asked for Irish Officers to man his

Operations Cell, even after the battalion had been withdrawn, and three of the six Irish UNMOs in UNIKOM have been sought for headquarters positions, and another two are scheduled for appointments soon in their respective sector headquarters. In every mission in which we serve, we are sought for senior or key appointments whether in the field or in headquarters. When Irish officers are left in situ, they rise to the top, as was seen, for example, in the recent past in OSCE Bosnia-Herzegovina. I believe that this expertise is not appreciated by many outside the Defence Forces at home. The fact is that we comprise a profession, and are very well qualified in comparison to our professional counterparts elsewhere. Our education and training stand comparison with that available anywhere in the world. And that has been proven. I think that we can with confidence state that the Public Service Benchmarking Body did largely recognise the expertise and qualifications of Irish Officers generally, given the awards they made to commandants in particular - commandants being the backbone of our observer commitment. The Body had a fairly major input from officers who were at the time

serving overseas. Finally, our lack of colonial, imperialist or post-colonial baggage also makes us very acceptable everywhere.

What's the situation like at the moment?

"It is calm right now. There are no major incidents in the DMZ, though you will be aware of incidents involving US forces in Kuwait. At the moment the situation is very tense, people in the area are expecting the situation to develop at UN level.

Where are we at the moment?

"We have personnel located throughout the world. Furthest west would be Western Sahara where we have some observers. At the moment our main presence would be on the Horn of Africa and the Balkans. There are 225 people stationed around the Horn of Africa at present, specifically in Eritrea (UNMEE). This mission will be terminated next year. We have military police serving with SFOR, the stabilisation force in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It also faces termination. We also have a transport company with KFOR, in Kosovo. This is being downgraded at pres-

ent and will be replaced by a mechanised infantry company next year, in a joint Finnish/Irish battalion. We have a long history of co-operation with the Finns, who were our neighbours for a long period in Lebanon, and indeed our Finnish SISU APCs for the battalion in Lebanon received heavy maintenance from Finbatt. In East Timor we have a platoon integrated into a New Zealand battalion, so the idea of working in close co-operation has been tried, albeit on a small scale. In the Middle East, UNTSO and UNIFIL have small Irish contingents. Our UNIFIL commitment was drastically reduced in November of last year, when our battalion was repatriated for the final time, and we have about 10 observers with UNTSO, which covers Israel and adjacent Arab states. Finally we have a number of personnel deployed around Europe and the Caucasus with quasi-civilian missions run by OSCE and EU. Interestingly, about 90% of personnel in these missions would be specifically recruited from the Armed Forces of the OSCE and EU states respectively. As Dag Hammerskoljd said "Peacekeeping is not a job for soldiers - but only soldiers can do it".

What is the effect of the Irish Defence Forces losing their battalion strength in deployment?

"As professionals, we believe very firmly that a properly equipped infantry battalion with appropriate support is an essential element of our peacekeeping force. That came to an end in November of last year. You must remember that it was only by the provision of support weapons - heavy mortars - that a lid was kept on a very dangerous situation in Lebanon in the early days. There were actual battles at that time in other areas, between the French and the Palestinians, for example, and the UN Nepalese battalion were shelled by Israeli guns in the summer of 1978, as proven by crater analysis. The De Facto Forces attacked villages in our area, but the deployment of the heavy mortars was normally enough to cause them to cease-fire.

The brigade is the smallest military force to have a stand-alone capability, as it has a mix of all the elements needed to conduct operations. However, we have tended to use the infantry battalion that we had in Congo, Cyprus, Sinai and Lebanon as a kind of mini-brigade, in that the infantry elements also had what we call combat support and combat service support elements attached to



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support and sustain it to a certain degree. This gave all Corps personnel the opportunity to build and refine skills in their own area of expertise. This is essential for the development of a professional force. It must be remembered that the White Paper, accepted by the Chief of Staff on behalf of the Defence Forces, concentrated on the concept of a "light infantry" force within a conventional brigade, because, as the Price Waterhouse consultants put it, if memory serves me right, that it was only such a force that could fulfil all the tasks given to the DF by the government. Such a force requires that the personnel be appropriately trained, and what better way than to use them in peace support operations. No infantry unit however, is in a position to sustain or support itself fully, and it would require other brigade elements attached, or otherwise in support, to it.

Officers in the Defence Forces believe that spreading ourselves around as we are with these different missions is also beneficial as we gain a variety of experiences, and get the opportunity to work with many other military forces. We can compare ourselves and learn where we can, while also teaching where we can. But it is no substitute for the learning experience that a battalion provides, particularly at junior leader level - that is for section and platoon commanders. They have the opportunity of leading their personnel on a 24-hour, 7-day, basis for a six-month period. That type of experience cannot be got in the home army. They have the opportunity

to take control of an area and exercise their initiative in leading their troops. In general, it can be said that people overseas have far greater responsibilities than their counterparts at home. That type of experience cannot be bought. For that reason it was a sad day when we closed the gates of Camp Shamrock in Tibnine for the last time on 30 Nov 2001.

There have been major changes in the world of peacekeeping since I went on my first mission nearly a quarter of a century ago. There has been a huge leap quantitatively in the number of missions set up or mandated by the UN. There has also been a move from peacekeeping in the classical Cyprus/Sinai/Lebanon mould to a more flexible and in many cases more robust approach. The UN is no stranger to enforcement missions - the Korean War of 1950-53 was of course a US-led, but UN mandated mission, and operations in Katanga in which Irish personnel took part were also effectively enforcement operations. But a qualitative change took place in 1993, when we sent a unit to Somalia, for what was billed as an enforcement mission. Then later in the 1990s, we deployed military police to SFOR, the NATO led UN Mandated mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The future looks to be one containing more of such regional based, or Chapter 8, missions. As such we must work towards interoperability with our likely peace-keeping partners in the European Union. This we have started. I look forward with confidence to its continuance."