

**Comdt Adrian Ó Murchú Chief Instructor of Defence
Forces Parachuting, talks to SIGNAL magazine
about Parachuting in the Defence Forces
and about plans to see it develop
further in the coming
years. By Ruairi
Kavanagh**

FLYING HIGH

“In addition to my appointment as an instructor in the Military College, I am also the Chief Instructor of Defence Force Parachuting. As the title suggests, I am responsible to the Director of Training for all parachuting in the Defence Forces. Our activities are divided into two main areas. The first and longest-standing aspect is sports parachuting, run by An Para-Chumann Mileata (PCM – The DF Parachute Club). In its most basic form, this means taking people with no jump experience, putting them through a five-jump course and qualifying them as basic parachute jumpers. From those courses, certain jumpers ‘get the bug’ and continue on to become members of PCM’s panel of staff and instructors, from whom the DF Display Team (‘The Black Knights’) is drawn.”

“The second aspect of PCM Training Staff’s work is the establishment and maintenance of a military parachuting capability in the Defence Forces. This is something that we’ve developed in recent years in conjunction with the Army Ranger Wing

(ARW), which has a requirement to maintain an airborne capacity. While all of its personnel are qualified as basic parachutists, the unit also has a requirement for a tactical air insertion team that can be deployed covertly from high altitude onto a precise target.”

Genesis and Roles of PCM

Parachuting in the Defence Forces has its origins in the 1970s. It started when a number of young officers then serving in the Cadet School, including Lt Col Con McNamara, introduced it as part of adventure training for cadets at that time. Others involved over the years included Comdt (Retd) John Walsh, Col Tom Hodson and Comdt Gerry O’Leary. Since its foundation,

PCM has gone from strength to strength, and with the assistance of the Directorates of Training and Operations has built up a small stock of the very best in modern equipment. Since the late 1970s, PCM's Training Staff has been coming together at least twice every year to run courses, usually a basic course and an advanced course.

"For my part, I did my first parachute jump in 1979, and had maybe two or three jumps under my belt before I joined the Defence Forces. After I was commissioned, I did a PDF parachute course and then in my own time, I did several courses in France to earn civilian qualifications. I subsequently became involved in parachuting here with the Defence Forces, qualified as an instructor, and took over from Capt (Retd.) Bill Halliden as Chief Instructor in 1998."

"The Black Knights"

PCM's Instructors make up the panel for the Defence Forces Parachute Team (The Black Knights), which has two main functions. Firstly, the team represents the Defence Forces in national and international competitions. A measure of its success is the fact that the current senior and novice Irish accuracy champions are both from the Defence Forces team - Sgt Terry Murphy and his son, Pte Ronan Murphy, both from 2nd Infantry Battalion. The team also participates from time to time in CISM, the international military sports competition. Apart from representing the DF at competitions, the team also carries out a number of display jumps each year as part of the Defence Forces public relations effort.

"This year, we already have a busy programme lined up, with jumps into Belfield for the World Special Olympics Athletics Finals, the Salthill Air Show and the Mullingar Festival, to name a few," says Comdt Ó Murchú.

"What's the point of Parachuting in the Defence Forces?"

The military benefits of parachuting are self-evident, and can be identified in three main areas. Firstly and most obviously, it provides the DF, through the ARW, with the capacity to covertly insert an operational team from 14,000 ft into a tactical target area. At this height, both HALO (High Altitude Low Opening) and HAHO (High Altitude High Opening) can be conducted. Using these methods, the ARW's Air Insertion Team has the capability to jump at night with full military equipment and weapons. They are able to land with a high degree of accuracy on a pre-arranged target and conduct their mis-



Surveying the drop-zone prior to a jump.

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sion, for example establish an observation point or conduct a close target reconnaissance. The unit is also beginning to develop tandem jumping, which is particularly useful in the insertion of a non-airborne specialist (such as Medical or EOD officers) into an area of operations.

"In theory, there is no ceiling height beyond which a person cannot jump," explains Adrian Ó Murchú. "That's dictated

by weather, aircraft type and tactical considerations. 14,000 feet is the highest you can jump from without oxygen, that's the highest altitude that we operate at in Ireland. With oxygen a jump at 30,000 feet is possible, and although we have had personnel qualified to do it, it does bring a whole new set of planning issues and problems."

The second way in which parachuting is worthwhile to the DF lies in the fact that

any activity which requires close co-ordination between the Army and the Air Corps is beneficial in the development of effective joint operations. This has knock-on effects for our operational effectiveness as a force, either at home or abroad. PCM's senior instructors, for example, would be among the most experienced members of the Army in dealing with heli operations, and as such can bring that expertise to bear on the tactical use of helis in a non-parachuting scenario. This would be of benefit to the development of army-aviation doctrine in the event of the purchase of medium lift helicopters for the Air Corps, for example.

The third and final way in which parachuting is beneficial is in the area of confidence training and team-building. It is one of the few training activities where soldiers, especially junior leaders, can be put in a position of responsibility where real danger is involved. As such, it can mirror some of the invaluable experience that these young NCOs and officers get on overseas missions.

"Even though the danger is minimised through training, drills and safety procedures," says Comdt Ó Murchú, "there is still a psychological aspect to parachuting which

can manifest itself as real fear. In a very controlled training environment, parachuting allows young soldiers to be exposed to that fear, and to overcome it. It gives them what is sometimes their first experience of real anxiety in a training setting and of working in an environment where psychological pressure is a constant factor. They get used to relying on their drills and their training to

able to purchase small amounts of equipment of a very high calibre.

"The gear that we have is as good as anything we've seen around the world," Adrian points out. "In 2000, we purchased 20 state of the art military specification parachutes, which can be used for both basic training and high altitude equipment jumping. On the public relations side, we recently

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overcome that pressure. It's a very valid lesson for all types of military personnel, who in their career could find themselves in very volatile situations."

Equipment

One of the benefits of operating with a relatively small training staff is that PCM are

made a case to the Chief of Staff and secured a once-off injection of funding into the "Black Knights". This enabled us to purchase custom-made jump suits, helmets and ancillary equipment. In marketing terms, it gives the display team a 'corporate look' and helps to establish our identity with the public. In general, the displays give us a chance to give



The 'Black Knights' calibrate altimeters before a display jump.



A member of the 'Black Knights' exiting a Dauphin.

something back to the Defence Forces, and we've found that it goes down well with the public, especially at family events."

The safety and training prevalent in all aspects of modern parachuting is a far cry from the origins of military parachuting in the mass drops that took place during the Second World War. The image of hundreds of paratroops plummeting in a seemingly disorderly fashion from a World War II transport plane would give the impression of high rate of casualties. But that was not the case, according to Comdt Ó Murchú.

"Most of the losses suffered during those jumps were actually due to the nature of the drop zone, with twisted ankles or knees, added to the normal casualties that you could expect from operating behind enemy lines. In fact, contrary to popular opinion, fatalities

during jumps in that period were very low. The reason for this was that the systems they used were remarkably simple. They jumped using round parachutes with a round reserve 'chute - the simpler the system, the more reliable it is. Even to this day, round parachutes have a very good safety record."

"Our own square parachutes, while more advanced and more accurate, are also potentially prone to more problems. For that reason, today's students have to complete a lot more training, and we spend a lot of time teaching canopy control. Using this equipment, mass jumps are possible, but not advisable. We have a limited stock of round parachutes for such jumps but unfortunately we don't have a suitable aircraft at our disposal. Anyway, for the type of work that we do here, whether it is for sport or military purposes,

we are aiming for a high degree of accuracy. Both our equipment and the small sizes of our teams reflect that. This requirement for accuracy is also reflected in our freefall procedures and our canopy control drills".

Technology and Safety

Parachuting technology is evolving reasonably fast; most of the developments in recent years have been related to safety. 'Cypres' automatic opening devices are fitted to all parachutes and under Defence Forces regulations, nobody jumps without having one of these devices fitted to their parachute. If a jumper is still in freefall at a pre-set altitude, it automatically opens the reserve 'chute. These safety systems have saved hundreds of lives world-wide, though thankfully PCM has never had a 'Cypres' firing since it started fitting the devices to its parachutes several years ago. Despite the popular mythology, parachuting is one of the safest adventure activities around. Statistically, the most dangerous part of a parachutist's day is the drive to the drop zone - by a massive percentage!

"We also use customised full-face helmets for competition and display jumps," says Comdt Ó Murchú. "The idea is to protect jumpers during formation jumps when someone might get an accidental knock, or during a hard landing. These helmets also have a built in audio-altimeter, a device that beeps when you're approaching your opening height. This is particularly useful for an instructor who might be monitoring a freefall student or involved in aerial photography."

The canopies used now are a reasonably new type of parachute, rectangular in shape. They are designed to fly, almost like a glider, onto a very specific target. At public displays, these parachutes allow a far greater degree of accuracy when landing. The parachutes are also made from rip-stop nylon, so that even if the chute is damaged, it can still function.

Air Corps Co-operation

PCM have been very well served by the Air Corps, but the appropriate aircraft may not always be available. "They've always facilitated us very well," says Comdt Ó Murchú. "This is something we're very grateful for, considering the pressure they are under to complete a wide range of operational and training missions. Whatever we have needed, whether for courses or displays, they have provided. Our relationship with the Air Corps is also helped by the fact that a large percentage of its pilots have themselves completed parachute courses. For basic training,

we use Cessna's from 104 (formerly Army Co-op) Squadron. For displays, we generally use helicopters provided by No 3 Ops Wing. Finally, for military jumping, we have periodic access to the CASAs of 101 (formerly Maritime) Squadron, which have the space and altitude capability that we need.

It's no secret that the Defence Forces have a problem with availability of aircraft in general - many of the aircraft are now older than the aircrew or parachutists that use them. The Allouette III, for example, is a fine aircraft and has given excellent service. In an ideal scenario, these aircraft should have been replaced by now. From our perspective, we are following with interest Air Corps efforts to secure new aircraft. We

understand that the level of our yearly activity does not merit a dedicated parachuting aircraft, but it is vital that whatever aircraft is chosen to replace the ageing Cessna, for example, should be suitable for parachuting as well as its other roles."

The Future

In 1999, PCM conducted a detailed review of the DF's sports parachuting regulations, which culminated in the publication of a consolidated SOP for sports parachuting ("The Blue Book"). Based on best international practise, a new military parachuting manual ("The Green Book") has been compiled and this will be submitted to the Director of DF Training and the Air Corps

for approval later this year.

"In recent years, several of us have undergone various international military instructors' courses," says Comdt Ó Murchú, "for example with the Swedish Defence Forces, which helped with the new manual. Concurrent with the publication of the "Green Book", certain changes in the administration of parachuting in the Defence Forces will be implemented. The reason for this is to ensure that we are 100% compliant with both our legal responsibilities and with best international practise. That's what we aim to achieve with this new manual, and it will be a very important development for the future of parachuting within the Defence Forces."

Comdt Adrian Ó Murchú is the Chief Instructor of DF Parachuting and the author of SOPs for both sport and military jumping in the Defence Forces. He was commissioned in 1984 and has held appointments in the 6th Infantry Battalion, the Army Ranger Wing, the Directorate of Intelligence and most recently in the Officer Training Wing of the Infantry School. He has served overseas in Lebanon, Somalia and Western Sahara, and has recently returned from Paris having completed the French Command and Staff course at the Ecole Militaire.

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(L-R) PCM Jumpmaster Cpl Ray Hennessy, PCM Inst. Sgt Jay Curley and PCM Chief Inst. Comdt. Adrian Ó Murchú