



*Capt Gerry Flynn on Diamond Explosion pictured during
The Kerrygold Speed Stakes at the R.D.S.*

*Máirtín Breathnach
found the Army
Equitation School at
full gallop when he
visited recently.*

Man taking to horseback is actually credited with an increase in warfare. In ancient times, newly domesticated horses represented a very valuable and easily stolen asset, which gave rise to conflict amongst early tribes. Horseback riding also led to the expansion of man's area of movement, which in turn led to a 're-negotiation' of territorial boundaries between different tribes.

West of the Ural Mountains in northern Kazakhstan, archaeologists recently discovered the remains of horses with 'bit wear' on their teeth dating from 3500-3000 BC. So far, it is the earliest recorded evidence of man's domestication of the horse. The military use for the horse wasn't long to follow.

Initially horses were used to pull chariots into battle, graduating to mounted cavalry which proved more effective, particularly during the Middle Ages.

In fact, the use of the horse in warfare has been one of most enduring aspects of military tactics since the dawn of civilisation. Ever since Ghenghis Khan scorched across the Mongolian plateaus through to Attila the Hun's raids throughout Europe and on to the Anzacs' legendary mounted charge at Bersheeba during World War I, the horse has served military commanders well for the best part of the last two millennia.

As a nation, it is generally considered the Irish are good with horses and have been very successful in all manner of equine sports. A mixture of climate, attitude and attention to detail have allowed horses in this country to prosper given the right setting and care.

Since 1927, the Defence Forces Equitation School has been on the frontier of Irish equestrianism. The school has produced some of the most celebrated riders in the history of Irish show jumping and has on many occasions been key to Ireland's success at international Grand Prix events.

The School was set up while the fledgling Irish state was getting to its feet and its purpose then, as it is now, was to promote the new state and promote the Irish sport horse.

It remains the remit of Lt Col Gerry Mullins, Commanding Officer of the School and one of Ireland's most decorated show jumpers. Lt Col Mullins runs a busy school in McKee Barracks and it's a hub of equestrian activity on the appropriately named Blackhorse Avenue.

When I called, Lt Col Mullins was imparting his decades of experience to 2nd Lt Brian Curran-Cournane and his mount as he put the pair through their show jumping paces. The technical aspects of show jumping are rarely evident to the ordinary onlooker on a sunny day at the RDS Horseshow. The importance of each stride and how the rider makes the horse respond for each individual fence is an eye-opener to the uninitiated. Absolute perfect timing can be the difference between clearing a fence and serious injury or worse to the rider.

"We are the only Irish riders who must ride Irish horses," says Lt Col Mullins in reference to the School's *raison d'être*. "Any Irish professionals who ride abroad have the possibility of riding with foreign horses. Our mission is to preserve not only the Irish competition horse but also to be able to promote



Lt. David O'Brien on Cruise Hill during the Kerrygold International at the Kerrygold Horse Show, RDS, Dublin.

**"We are the only Irish riders
who must ride Irish horses,"
says Lt Col Mullins**

Ireland. In international competitions, the army is seen as being very much Irish.”

After terrorist attacks in the US in September 2001, the Equitation School sent a team to Washington where it won the Nations Cup and afterwards went on to win

At home, the school does approximately 40 to 50 shows a year and hosts the same number again in visits to the School each year from various bodies, schools, colleges and heads of other Defence Forces etc.

“We also do an exchange with the

Uruguay. In fact, we received quite a few requests from foreign armies to come to the school to try and learn from us.”

The School tasks itself in maintaining a high standard of equitation in Ireland.

“Young people,” says Gerry Mullins, “who probably have no other possibility of training in this area, come to the School and are trained to international level. The coaching methods have not only been developed in the school but are available to the wider public in Ireland.”

“Every young rider, as they come in,” explains Comdt Pat McCartan, 2 i/c of the Equitation School, “are trained to a certain method. The method doesn’t vary in its basic form. They will always keep up to date with any changes in the sport. That’s done through exposure to top international riders at international shows. They look and learn and it’s assimilated into our own little culture here. In the C/O’s absence any number of riders such as Capt Gerry Flynn, Capt David O’Brien or Lt Shane Carey can take lessons with the younger riders. We’re self-generating, we keep turning over instructors and everybody learns as a result.”

The School is similar to any other modern sporting fraternity utilising all of the

“In order for them to have a fair chance of success here, they must have had some experience at national level.”

- Comdt Pat McCartan

the Nations Cup in Toronto.

“It was the first time a foreign team had won in Washington in 15 years,” Lt Col Mullins points. “To add to that, after the competition and the events of September 11th, we linked up with the Irish community and Bord Fáilte to get the message across that Ireland was still very much open for American people to come as tourists. This is type of promotion is always part of our mission in many of the places we go.”

British Royal Horse Artillery and the King’s Troops. We’ve recently had a visit from some of their riders who came here for training.”

The School is also involved in developing the coaching system in Ireland and was instrumental in starting it and widening its appeal to such an extent that the governing body of the sport wants the system to be used worldwide. “Some of the systems used in the School,” says Lt Col Mullins, “are used as far away as Argentina, Chile and



“Our biggest asset here is our staff,” says Lt Col Mullins. “They are very experienced and very good at what they do. One of the most important aspects of our unit are the grooms, the NCOs, and the people who travel with the horses to all the shows, who give up all of their Saturdays and Sundays during the summer.”



Lt. Shane Carey pictured on Killossery at the Kerrygold International, Kerrygold Horse Show, RDS, Dublin.

**“Because we only use Irish horses,
we’re proofing the breed. We’re
ensuring that people know that a
particular line is going well.”
- Lt Col Mullins**

most up to date sports techniques available including sports psychology.

“We bring in a sports psychologist from time to time,” says Gerry Mullins, “and concentrate on the various psychological aspects of the sport such as concentration, dedication and commitment. When you work with horses you have to be dedicated.”

Selection for the School is run in parallel with normal Cadet selection procedures. Preliminary boards at a regional level send forward applicants for the School.

“We would have a certain amount of input at these preliminary boards,” says Comdt McCartan, “and give guidance as to the candidates we are looking for. In order

for them to have a fair chance of success here, they must have had some experience at a national level. The riders that are here already are of an international class so they must have a realistic chance of being able to break into that circle. There are up to 14 real contenders for the Irish team at the moment of which three are from the School.”

The School is also involved with many other equestrian bodies. Lt Col Gerry Mullins is on the board of management of the National Coaching and Training Centre (NCTC).

“I’m head of a committee, called the Assimilation Committee which is involved with all sports not just equestrian and it’s remit is to assimilate experienced sportspeople and coaches into the National Coaching and Development Programme which is run by the NCTC. We’re directors of the Equestrian Federation of Ireland. We’ve chaired the governing body’s coaching committee here. We have been on the Equestrian Committee with the RDS and involved with the Show jumping Association and Eventing Ireland. I’m also on the Jumping Committee of the International Federation of the sport. So we’re kept busy.”

It also helps by advising breeders on breeding and ‘proofing’ sport horses.

“We proof Irish competition horses at all levels,” explains Lt Col Mullins. “In other words, because we only use Irish sport horses, we’re proofing the breed. We’re ensuring that people know that a particular line is going well and may be a good line to follow.”

Lt Col Mullins desk in his office is stacked with videos from Irish breeders showing their horses and he receives many every week from hopeful breeders from all over the country.

There are two ways in which a breeder can have their horse selected by the School through purchase and leasing. For the horse to be purchased it must firstly undergo a rigorous trial period after which if it is found to be suitable it will be purchased from breeder. Secondly, the horse can be leased, again after a trial period. The amount paid per year and the length of the lease is agreed on as fairly as possible between the breeder and the School.

The list of representative tasks the School is involved in is endless. As well as performing the job of Chef d’Equipe to Senior, Young Rider and Junior show jumping teams and the School coaches Young Rider and Junior show jumping teams. They also give a much-coveted bursary, the Minister for Defence Bursary, where two

young riders are selected each year and are given one month's training and competition in the School.

There is the belief in the School that through their work they maintain and improve the goodwill and understanding between the Defence Forces and the public.

"We would see ourselves as having a very close liaison with the public," says Gerry Mullins elaborating. "We're easily approachable at national shows and people like to come and see the horses, they like to come up and talk to us and find out what's going on. They tell us about the horse they've bred or the one their father bred etc. It's a very good talking point and a good entree into a situation where the breeder feels comfortable talking to you." It is widely acknowledged the best young riders in Europe are based at the School. Last year, the School won 26 international classes, the



Last year the school won 26 international classes, the greatest number of wins since the 1970s.



Capt Gerry Flynn on Diamond Explosion during The Kerrygold Speed Stakes at the R.D.S., Dublin.

greatest number of wins since the 1970s and are by far the leading Army worldwide in equestrian events. Indeed, it's the School's willingness to travel to awkward locations, that has ensured Ireland remains in the top flight.

"You will always find," says Pat McCartan, "that there is a certain amount of jockeying for position from the international riders to try and go to the big money shows but some may not want to travel to an awkward destination. It may not be a big show, the prize money may be small but there may be points in the Super League available."

The Super League is a new departure in show jumping where the top eight teams in the world compete at super league shows in major show jumping arenas. This is the Premier League of show jumping and through the dedication of the School, Ireland secured a coveted place in it recently.

"At the end of 2001," says Comdt McCartan, "Gerry Flynn went to America where the team won three Nations Cup. At the end of last year when it looked like we were going to get squeezed out by Switzerland, we sent three Army riders to Zagreb in order to try and gain points. While we didn't win, we put sufficient pressure on the Swiss causing them to make mistakes and maintained the status quo allowing us to qualify."

"The general feeling in the industry is that we do a very good job. Breeders are impressed with our travel to new and unusual destinations, which opens up new markets for them."



Lt Gerry Flynn and Capt Shane Carey with Lt Col Gerry Mullins (centre).

The general feeling in the industry is that we do a very good job. Breeders are impressed with our travel to new and unusual destinations, which opens up new markets for them.

“Our biggest asset here is our staff,” says Lt Col Mullins. “They are very experienced and very good at what they do. One of the most important aspects of our unit are the grooms, the NCOs, and the people who travel with the horses to all the shows, who give up all of their Saturdays and Sundays during the summer. They deal in sport that doesn’t know time to any great extent. There are early morning starts and it doesn’t finish

until late. The drivers that are here head off on long journeys with the horses. Last year they drove all the way to Croatia.”

Comdt McCartan concurs.

“The grooms here are absolutely dedicated to their horses. The NCOs are key also. They are experienced, practical and know what to do in an emergency. They have enough veterinary experience to know what to do when a horse gets travel sickness. Our

horses rarely arrive at a show having lost a pound after a long journey. They are always looked after.”

Over the years, the School has had some great ambassadors on the national and international circuit.

“We’ve had some great riders over the years,” recalls Lt Col Mullins. “Col Ned Champion, Col Ronnie McMahon, Comdt John Ledingham, Capt Con Power and the late Capt Dave Foster who unfortunately got killed eventing afterwards. We have to fight hard to get on the national teams, which is the way it should be, but we are very successful. We have a proud history, we’re 77 years old now and we’re very well regarded all over the world. I think the reason for us to exist is even stronger than before. We’re the only ones tasked with riding only Irish horses; we are unique in the international arena as it is easy for people to see us in uniform and identify us as being Irish. Many professional riders now wear the livery of their sponsors rather than a national colour so it makes us stand out.”

According to Tony Hellard, a researcher into the British military horse, the British military have in the past favoured the Irish-bred hunter with an element of thoroughbred for their military needs, either for cavalry, transport or artillery.

“The Boer war had been a disaster for the British,” he explains, “through lack of good horse management.

Afterwards horsemanship became a major principle for the trooper, driver and gunner by the start of the First World War. The manuals published at the time are still relevant today and are still used. Even today, Britain’s military horses mainly come from Ireland. The army has traditionally looked for the 15.2 hands good boned mount and he or she has served well.”

He goes on to describe ‘the Hairys’ as they were known.

“They were hard uncompromising beasts who were honest characters but quite child like when they wanted to be and I’ve yet to meet an ex-mounted soldier who doesn’t have a fund of stories about his four legged mate.”