

**T**he School of Physical Education provides a wide range of courses designed to enhance the physical fitness of all military personnel. The courses are outlined in the annual Defence Forces Training Directive and cater for all ranks; in the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service.

The courses on offer at the School of Physical Education range from a two-week improver swimmer's course, to a four-month physical training instructor's (PTI) course. Comdt Flynn describes the progressive nature of the training: "Those students who complete a physical training leader's course, and who subsequently gain practical experience applying leader skills in their units, can apply for a six-week physical training supervisor's course. On return to their units they become actively involved as PT supervisors and help out the physical training instructors in the various units and barracks. If they have been active at that level for a period of a year, they can apply to attend the next highest level, which is the physical training instructor's course – a four-month course."

As with many other schools, military or civilian, the School of Physical Education's main problem is a lack of staff. In November 1998, the number of staff was cut almost in half – but the School has continued to provide an excellent service to the Defence Forces with severely depleted personnel resources.

Maree Flynn joined the Defence Forces in 1980 as the holder of a degree in Physical Education from Thomond College. After a short time training in the Cadet School at the Curragh, she moved to Sandhurst to train with the UK Military and returned to the Curragh to complete the Irish aspects of her cadetship. She was commissioned in 1981, becoming one of the first four female officers in the Defence Forces.

"My first appointment was as a 2nd Lieutenant in McDonagh Barracks, and afterwards I spent 2 years as an instructor here, in what was then called the DF School of Physical Culture," explains Comdt Flynn. "From here I had two postings to Lebanon and I served in Africa on secondment to the Department of Foreign Affairs. In the mid-1990s I was in Zaire and Rwanda with GOAL and Concern for approximately 12 months each. Subsequently, I spent two years as Military Assistant to the Force Commander in Cyprus (UNFICYP) between 1998 and 2000. On return from UNFICYP, I was posted to DFHQ into a logistics function. From there I was seconded to the Department of Justice for two

# SURVIVAL



## OF THE FITTEST

The Defence Forces Physical Education School (DFPES) at the Defence Forces Training Centre, formerly the Army School of Physical Culture, plays an essential role in the fostering and training of physical fitness across the spectrum of the Defence Forces. Andy Dennehy speaks with Commandant Maree Flynn, as OC of this School about the recently upgraded facilities.



The facilities at the centre are perfect for training.

**The School of Physical Education provides a wide range of courses to enhance the physical fitness of the military at large.**

By 1897 physical education was an essential part of the military training carried out in the Curragh, and the training and continuous fitness indicates the importance given to physical education as a part of the military curriculum around the turn of the century and up to the period of the First World War.

As Ireland gained independence in 1922, physical education facilities continued to be improved and developed. The military authorities of the newly established state immediately grasped the importance of physical fitness. The outbreak of WWII in 1939 heralded many changes in the Defence Forces organisation. The army expanded greatly in number with the need to train personnel, keep them fit and develop an esprit de corps becoming paramount. Major improvements to the sporting facilities available to personnel were introduced during the war era. The swimming pool, which came into existence as an open swimming bath at the turn of the century, underwent major renovations. By the 1940s it was covered as a permanent building structure and the pool was upgraded. The pool continued in service being used by military personnel and their families for the next four decades. During the 1980s the complex was again renovated, receiving a new roof and an upgraded water heating system. In 1998 after nearly 100 years of service, the pool complex was

years, where my role was as contingency officer in the newly established inter-departmental agency, which had responsibility for the reception and integration of asylum-seekers and refugees into the country.”

In August of this year Comdt Flynn was appointed School Commandant at the Defence Forces School of Physical Education.

**HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL**

The Curragh became an established military training camp in 1855. Lt Col Lugard, the Royal Engineer Officer who designed the camp, included in his book of plans the first buildings used for physical education and exercise – the racquet and ball courts, which are still in use today. Other sporting interests were also catered for, as golf commenced to be played on what is now the Curragh Golf Course: the oldest in Ireland. Cricket was also played on what is now the McDonagh football pitch. For the remainder of the 19th century, sport facilities continued to be provided and existing facilities improved, including a purpose-built gymnasium.



The state of the art water facility at the Curragh during Naval Service recruit training.

closed and demolished to be replaced by a new complex in 2001.

At the end of WWII, great efforts were made in the development of a more modern and up to date approach to the science of physical education, gymnastics and athletics. The Army School of Physical Education was established on a permanent basis in 1945. In 1948 the International Military Sports Body, CISM, was formed. Ireland became a member of this organisation in 1964.

The Army School of Physical Culture was given a permanent home in 1957 with the construction of a new gymnasium. This building provided the location for physical education in the Curragh Training Camp and for the training of the physical education instructors. The gymnasium underwent major renovation during 2001 and re-opened as a state-of-the-art facility.

"The school is newly revamped," says Comdt Flynn. "The existing sports-hall received a number of improvements, including shower and dressing room facilities. The swimming pool now boasts a diving pool for sub-aqua training, a six-lane 25-metre swimming pool and a beginner's training pool. The fitness suite, steam room, lecture theatres and the entrance and reception area have also been built."

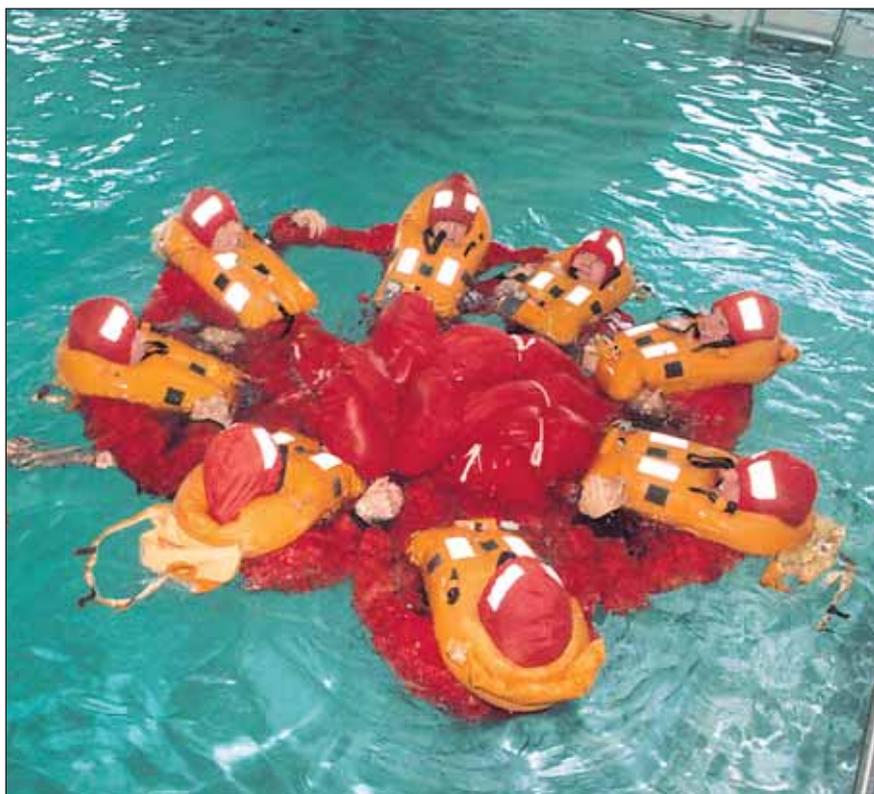
### TRAINING THE TRAINERS

The provision of physical education is, quite obviously, essential to any army. "As far as



Naval Service personnel prior to taking the plunge.

## The importance of physical fitness was immediately grasped by the military authorities of the newly established state.



Making a circle to stay warm, personnel create a human life-raft for a crew member who does not have a flotation device.

the Defence Forces is concerned, regardless of the specialities that any soldier is involved in, the basic requirement is that they are fit," says Comdt Flynn. "Clearly, a military unit's performance will be enhanced or impeded based on the fitness status of the unit."

The primary courses that the School provides are the Physical Training Supervisors and Physical Training Instructors courses. The School also provides for a wide range of ancillary courses, such as an unarmed combat instructors course, basic and advanced swimming courses and lifeguard courses. "We train life savers up to the standard of Pool Lifeguard, a civilian qualification recognised by the Irish Water Safety Association, which is the body that certifies such qualifications. At the end of the course, inspectors from the Irish Water Safety Association are brought in to test the students, thereby ensuring the highest standard."

As well as conducting these courses, the swimming pool is available to the local community and schools, she says; "At present 11 local primary schools use the



Two shoulder throw, part of the unarmed combat course.

**We are a school, but we also have a responsibility to foster physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle throughout the defence forces.**

facility on a daily basis. It's available to the military the rest of the time."

### **KEEPING IN TOUCH**

"We encourage anyone who passes through the courses here to remain in touch with us by phone or by email. If they have any queries or difficulties when they go back to their units in terms of producing the required programmes, we're here on a consultative basis as well. We're in the process of updating our website (<http://www.defenceforces.ie/army/dftc.htm>) at the moment and we hope to make it as interactive as possible so that it can act as a valuable centre of information for the Defence Forces."

### **FOSTERING FITNESS**

Part of the remit of the School is to foster the development of physical fitness. "We are a School, but we also have a responsibility to foster physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle throughout the Defence Forces."

As the numbers in the Defence Forces have been reduced considerably, the number of tasks has gone up disproportionately. Commanding officers are finding it difficult to regularly train their soldiers as a body, so it has been identified as being essential that individuals are motivated to take responsibility for their own physical fitness. Military personnel are encouraged to take pride as professional soldiers in attaining and maintaining a high level of physical fitness. Physical Training Instructors design specific programmes of training that can be specifically geared towards each individual," she explains.

As well as this, Comdt Flynn maintains that the School must continue to update both the PTIs training and the School's knowledge and expertise. "We believe very strongly that the whole process of physical education can't stop after the course has been completed. It needs to be constantly fostered and updated. We like to feel that PT instructors are not isolated; they are part of a larger family of physical education specialists."

The School maintains links with the civilian specialist schools such as Thomond College, of which Comdt Flynn is a graduate. Annually the School takes four or five students from the degree course in Thomond College on work experience on six months work experience. "This is a mutually beneficial arrangement. They get their experience here working alongside my staff, they learn from the activities going on here and the staff keep abreast of the latest advances and so on. There is a lot of interest in gaining work experience here in the



Naval personnel in team-work exercises at the water centre.

**The Defence Forces should be aware that this body of expertise is here and available.**

School, so much so that we conduct a series of interviews to choose the successful candidates," says Comdt Flynn.

#### **WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS**

Looking to the future, Comdt Flynn says that there are two lines of progress that she would like to see at the School. "One would be in the physical facility itself, which is an excellent facility as it stands. There was €3.5m spent on the refurbishment and upgrade. We propose to develop a military obstacle course adjacent to the facility and we have visited the UK Armed Forces training establishments with a view to building similar here. It is also proposed to develop an all weather multi-purpose pitch for soccer, hockey, etc at this facility. Our greatest challenge, of course, is a lack of staff. We are, however, presently in negotiations with the Property Management Branch in the Department of Defence in an effort to employ part-time and full-time civilian lifeguards."

It is anticipated that the Department of Defence will employ these extra lifeguards in the immediate future. These extra staff are an absolute necessity to assist this top class facility being used to its maximum potential as well as allowing the pool to be opened for extended hours.



Lt Jayne Lawlor instructing on the unarmed combat course.