

# Challenges in a Changing World

Interview with Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Lieutenant General Jim Sreenan.

**In a candid interview with SIGNAL, the recently appointed Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Jim Sreenan speaks to Ruairi Kavanagh on the challenges facing the organisation.**



One of Lieutenant General Sreenan's most pertinent and relevant statements during the course of his interview with SIGNAL was also one of the simplest: "The Irish public don't really know what the Defence Forces do." It is a clarion fact that the sterling work done both on Irish soil and overseas by our military professionals is barely recognised by the majority of Irish taxpayers. It is evident that General Sreenan sees a need for the Defence Forces not only to do a good job but to be seen to be doing a good job. The key

### The Current Situation

"The first point I would like to make is that we are dealing with a rapidly changing international security situation," says General Sreenan, referring to the threat of global terrorism including the recent bombings in Madrid and of course the changed security environment since September 11th 2001. He also speaks of the difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan in addition to the ongoing situation in the Balkans. He also refers to a "surge of UN Blue Helmet operations". "We have deployed in very volatile regions of West

personnel in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Ivory Coast as well as a host of other overseas locations. Preparing and providing for these missions is highly demanding. Meanwhile, we're deeply involved in ensuring that we can meet our commitments under the EU Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF). The emphasis here, quite rightly, is moving on to the rapid deployment of committed troops and assessment and certification of the quality of the troops committed. We are deployed in and are deploying to extremely dangerous and demanding theatres and it is my duty,



“ Serious time and effort has gone into restructuring over the past decade.

"Irish troops are deployed in some very volatile parts of West Africa," says Gen Sreenan, referring mainly to the UNMIL Deployment.

phrase for his term as Chief of Staff is, as he puts it, 'operational output.' The Chief believes that reorganisation and investment must be followed up with tangible operational effectiveness and an enhanced level of training. SIGNAL asked him how he would put his strategy as Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces into words?

Africa, such as Liberia. We have rapid developments ongoing in European security and defence policy, beyond the stage of developing systems and procedures to implementation. We are also now heavily engaged in Kosovo and likely to participate in an EU force which in all probability will take over from SFOR (Stabilisation Force) in Bosnia at the end of this year. We have

above all else, to ensure that the people we deploy are equipped and, even more importantly, trained to the very highest professional standards." The General speaks of the developing military means required to deal with the terrorist threat. "We have to develop an intelligence gathering capability, interacting with the agencies of other forces and making the fullest use of our own

people deployed overseas. We have to develop our Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) expertise to deal in particular with Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's) used to deliver these harmful chemical or biological agents. We also have to have plans in place to support the Gardaí in the event of a terrorist outrage on home soil. Therefore we must continue to contribute to national emergency planning." General Sreenan speaks frequently of switching the focus from enabling strategies, such as restructuring and reorganisation, to the

take into account the new security environment of the modern world in the early days of the 21st century. "We have to update our doctrine and take account of new equipment, new organisations, changing security circumstances and the requirement of interoperability with our European partners. We've to develop new procedures and arrangements to train our people in the maintenance of the very sophisticated, hi-tech equipment now in our inventory. I'm now developing my own modernisation agenda in terms of operational effectiveness and as I've

## The Role Of The Chief of Staff & The White Paper on Defence

While there is no arguing that General Sreenan sees himself making a telling impact on the organisation to which he has dedicated his working life, there are certain issues which will challenge every Chief of Staff. For example, General Sreenan must provide effective leadership to the men and women in Defence Forces, but he is also the senior military advisor to the Government. There are issues where the two roles could be interpreted as being



**We cannot reorganise for ever to the detriment of other key areas. ”**

Irish Army Rangers on deployment with UNMIL. Lt Gen Sreenan says the key phrase during his term of office will be 'operational output.'

development of capabilities. "Serious time and effort has gone into restructuring over the past decade. We cannot reorganise forever ever to the detriment of other key areas. The agenda must switch to other aspects of the development of operational capability."

General Sreenan believes that the doctrine which the Defence Forces has been operating under needs to change to

indicated already I am doing so against a very changed and changing operational security situation, including the international terrorist threat which, while not at a critical threat level in Ireland, is nevertheless something that cannot be ignored." The sizeable reserve of military power at the Government's disposal during the recent May Day events highlighted this.

on a collision course. How does the Chief of Staff effectively manage both these, sometimes opposing, functions and to what extent must he stand up for the Defence Forces? "Of course my job is to implement the policy laid down by the Minister of Defence and the Government and as the senior military advisor I have to input into the development of that policy. I will implement, must implement and am obliged



The Javelin Anti-Armour system is one of the significant investments which Lt Gen Sreenan is keen to build on.

to implement the policy of the Government, but as I said to you, that soldier (referring to a statuette of an Irish serviceman on the table in front of him) is there as a constant reminder to me of my responsibility to our soldiers, sailors and airmen, so it's a question of balancing these two. Therein lies my duty."

The Defence Forces has indeed needed, and continues to need, strong voices in high places, as the organisation has put up with a lot of pain without too much in the way of gain over recent years. This is something that General Sreenan obviously feels strongly about. "I feel confident in saying that no other Public Service organisation has delivered anything even resembling the progressive change in the Defence Forces over the past decade. We have taken out several layers of headquarters and reduced

our strengths by 20% at a time when public service numbers were going up by 35% and civil service numbers by 32%. We have gone from 4.58% of government expenditure in 1991 to 2.28% in 2003. At the same time we have maintained our levels of overseas operations, indeed taken on the more costly non-UN operations and we have also met all our 'Aid To the Civil Power' (ATCP) commitments at home.

Do you envisage any further barrack closures and if so will there be further reorganisation?

"Minister Smith has closed six barracks and while there was a fair degree of dislocation and turbulence at the time, it was a welcome development. We are still working our way through some of the issues arising from the closures as I am not aware of any

plans for further closures. The PriceWaterhouseCoopers strategy recommended more closures. In regard to reorganisation I would say that the arrangements in place facilitate the overseas situation while providing for the appropriate command and control measures for the domestic situation. We have to work our way through the integration of a Reserve Company into our major units and that will take some time. If anybody can convince me there is a better way I am open to that but I am not going to once again disrupt the entire organisation unless there are very clear and tangible benefits accruing."

## Equipment

While the switch to the 'operational output' mode of thinking is a distinct and logical progression for the Defence Forces, there are still many equipment issues that need to be addressed within the Defence Forces. The day prior to our interview, the Chief of Staff was present at the delivery of the first three Pilatus PC-9 aircraft to the Air Corps at Baldonnel Aerodrome. However, the PC-9 consignment is the first delivery of this calibre of training aircraft to the Air Corps in over two decades. The rotary wing of the Air Corps is waiting for the procurement process to begin for the promised fleet of light utility helicopters. Many, of course, still remember the debacle surrounding the procurement of the intended Sikorsky S-92. How does General Sreenan propose to address equipment issues and where, more importantly, does he envisage the funding to come from?

"We have had a very successful equipment programme, going far beyond the well-publicised MOWAG APCs, ships and aircraft procurement programmes. At the same time the money is allocated to us on an annual basis and we really don't know what we're going to get next year. It is very hard to enter into a commitment. This arises most often in Defence, where capital items are quite expensive and you must have them phased over a couple of years and so you are living in the hope that the money will come to you next year. It makes long-term planning very difficult, but we have good management programmes in place for the past few years. But the 0.8% of GNP allocated to us for this year includes the last of the proceeds from the property sales. It's also worth mentioning that 10 years ago we were allocated 1.6% of GNP. On that basis the prospects for 2005 look very bleak. The baseline figure must now be addressed and the Minister has already indicated that he will be mounting a very serious campaign at Government level during the estimate stage. On his past record in this area, I have reason to be confident."

**“ The sales of military barracks and property that bailed the Defence Forces out over the last few years is not a long-term solution. The baseline figure of 0.8% of GNP has got to be addressed now. ”**

However, €43 million was returned unused to the exchequer by the Department of Defence, and this from a Department which would traditionally find it difficult to obtain sufficient funds for major projects.

“I think that if you take our record over the time I was DCoS Support and I was deeply involved in the estimates, I think we were on 98-99% spend over the period and I’d say it would be much higher than most other government departments. While we haven’t got multi-annual budgets, we were able to take on multi-annual projects through good management of the monies that were available. The MOWAG APCs, the new aircraft, Naval vessels are all outcomes of multi-annual projects.” On the issue of funding and where exactly it is going to come from; “Minister Smith has been very creative and persuasive with the Minister for Finance in regards to proceeds from our property sales over the past few years. The sales of military barracks and property that

bailed the Defence Forces out over the last few years is not a long-term solution. The baseline figure of 0.8% of GNP has got to be addressed now.”

The question is put to General Sreenan that in such an uncertain environment is there room for concerns over whether the light utility helicopters procurement process will come to fruition? “There’s no doubt that we will be going to tender very shortly and before the end of this year we will be signing off a contract.” So you can guarantee the successful delivery of these aircraft? “I’m hesitant to guarantee anything I don’t control, but I am confident. The light utility helicopters are vital for operations and training. When we go abroad we operate on the aircraft provided by other nations so it is absolutely essential we are fully trained before deployment overseas.”

While on the subject of the roles of the Defence Forces and how they integrate with the Gardaí, SIGNAL put the question to

General Sreenan as to how he envisages his own role in relation to financial authority within the Defence Forces. The Garda Commissioner has financial responsibility as Accounting Officer for inputs and outputs within his force, does General Sreenan feel that the Chief of Staff should fulfil a similar role?

“I have a very clear and unambiguous position on this, which is in line with the first Efficiency Audit Group (EAG 1) report. Major procurements, for example ships, aircraft and APC programmes should remain with the Dept. Everything else should be delegated to the Chief of Staff and he should be made Accounting Officer as is the case with the Garda Commissioner. The necessary controls can be exercised through the estimates process. Remember, every programme is critically analysed by the higher level planning and procurement group, there is the Department of Defence internal audit, there is external scrutiny by the Department of



The MOWAG APC procurement programme was a very successful, well publicised project paid for on a multi-annual system.

Finance, there are expenditure reviews and as well as all of that we have the external audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General. So I think there are sufficient controls to ensure the military aren't going to do anything crazy with the funds!"

## Training

The whole issue of Officer training within the Defence Forces is something which has had to adapt to the changing structures and demands which have been put upon the organisation. There are two distinct strata relating to officer training. The first is professional training for officers and further military education. There have been many positive developments in this regard, especially with the MA in Defence Studies in Maynooth as an integral part of the Command & Staff Course. The other is the training aspects which come with the purchasing of new equipment. The comparable time an officer spends on full time residential military education is greater in other 'world-class' military organisations than it is in the Defence Forces. How important is such continuing professional education to the development and maintenance of core military skills?

"I feel first of all that education and training for officers is vital for professional development. We must be interoperable with our European partners and we must meet the common standards. We currently have troops serving with the Finns in Kosovo - but I wouldn't countenance placing Irish troops under the command of a Finnish officer who was not professionally trained and educated, I know that the Finns and other professional forces would have the same position. In the past it was much easier to identify the required education and training for the various appointments in the Cold War conventional setting. But, asymmetrical warfare and peace support operations require much greater independence of action and all around flexibility, which can only be met by a very broad and deep professional military education. That's dealing with your question at the level of education. We cannot move away and we must continually develop our education in line with what's happening internationally. Education and training are somewhat different.

"For example, it's very easy to say the army is buying 50 or 60 new APC's. You have to train people to drive them, you have to train people on the very sophisticated gunnery systems, you have to train people on the radio equipment and surveillance features that are on them. You have to train people on the maintenance. You have to train people on the operational and tactical deployment of them

and that's on one vehicle alone. We have bought lots of other equipment, surveillance equipment, night-vision devices, communication equipment; for all of that you must continually develop the doctrine, train at the individual level and then train at the collective level. The manufacturing companies run courses for our instructors and then the instructors must run courses for the operators. We do that by concentrating the equipment at the DFTC at the Curragh, in line with what PriceWaterhouseCooper told us in their review many years ago. That means bringing people to the Curragh and it is tremendously demanding, from a logistical point of view and the personal demands on people. That all leads to operational output, which as I said from the start is my focus.

**“ There is no doubt that the public in Ireland don't have a good idea of what the Defence Forces do and the more we try to raise the profile with the public, the more we realise how little the public seems to know about it. ”**

Operational output and training standards."

What's your views on the MA in Maynooth and the successful level of civilian and military integration there? "I'd say that the MA in Maynooth is an extremely positive development because it gives a level of external validation to our course. The added dimension of the work with Maynooth stretches the students in the areas of judgement, analysis and formulation of ideas and proposals. The development is in line with other professional forces and of course gives us greater self confidence when working on International Staffs." General Sreenan also believes that the civilian and military interaction on a campus like Maynooth can help boost the public image of the Defence Forces. "There is no doubt that the public in Ireland don't have a good idea of what the

Defence Forces do and the more we try to raise the profile with the public, the more we realise how little the public seems to know about it. So anything that takes us out into the campus of a university like Maynooth has to raise the profile."

## Decentralisation

"The first thing I'd like to say on decentralisation is that I'll be very sad to leave this beautiful James Gandon designed building here on Parkgate Street," says General Sreenan as plans to decentralise both the Department of Defence and Defence Forces Headquarters (DFHQ) to Newbridge gather pace. But there are critics of the plans. The decentralisation process will split up the Department and DFHQ. The former will be located in Newbridge, while the latter will be in the Curragh. Would it not be more practical to keep both elements together? "I have spoken to the Minister about this and certainly I raised with him the desirability of locating the strategic elements of DFHQ within the Department at Newbridge. DFHQ is part of the Department of Defence and I would like to see certain key elements of DFHQ stationed there. Minister Smith has said that he is open to this and we are going to discuss it further." So what exactly are the benefits of splitting the two elements up then? "DFHQ has operational responsibilities. We're most unusual in that every other armed force I know divides between strategic and operational, but we have them combined. Every other military organisation would have an army headquarters and a Defence Forces headquarters.

There would be a lot of benefits, for example, in terms of operations going into the Curragh camp, where the Communications Centre at the Curragh can be utilised so we don't need to build a new ComCen in Newbridge. There are operational considerations like that but the strategic direction and policy development requirements makes it necessary to locate some strategic elements with the Secretariat side of the Department."

## Key Challenges

Alongside the challenges of successfully leading the Defence Forces in line with their mission and the ever-increasing range of assignments, there are also other challenges at home, which the Chief must address. High among these is the state of the military's medical services, which in the words of General Sreenan are at a "critical" level. So how exactly can the first steps be taken towards making the medical services within the Defence Forces adequate for a 'world class' military organisation? "The first thing



Gen Sreenan is also focusing on making the Defence Forces a more attractive place to work by addressing issues in the 'Challenges of the Workplace' report.

that we have to admit and acknowledge is that we have critical shortages of medical officers. We have been examining this, we have had the Dunbar report and other examinations over the past number of years. I will say now that the solution does not lie in any one approach. There is no quick-fix answer to this. We must have a multi-faceted strategy. We're seriously engaged in this at the moment through the partnership committee. We are working with RACO and we are systematically working through a root and branch examination of the role and functions of the Medical Corps today and the medical services that must be provided, both at home and overseas, to everybody in our organisation." So what exactly will be done to address the problem now? "We're going to identify first of all what the organisation needs and then we're going to have to look and see how can those needs be met. It won't be solely by a Medical Corps as in the past. There has to be a hardcore of professional medical officers who remain with it and will have medical management responsibilities. There will be young medical officers who will deploy with us on exercises and operations at home and more particularly on operations overseas. As I see it there will be contracts put in place with local group practices or medical services that will be delivered to us on a contract basis. And we will have doctors who will be working half a week with us and maybe half a week in a hospital. It is going to

be a very different medical corps than we've had in the past. We're working away with RACO and we are using the partnership structure for this. Both RACO and ourselves are very conscious of how pressing it is."

In terms of making the Defence Forces an attractive option to medical professionals you're proposing things like three days' work as a GP and three days with the defence forces. What will be the cost of something like that? "Well there are more fundamental things than that. Doctors come in and operate within a healthy organisation, which is what we must be. They will be dealing largely with medical processing and injuries that were sustained on military training or exercises. That doesn't keep the doctor's skills up to date in the wider field of medicine. And that is necessary under the present regulations of the Medical Council. That's why the split arrangement I mentioned is an option."

### The Doyle Report

One of the more negative pieces of publicity that the Defence Forces have had to deal with over recent years is the Doyle Report on harassment and bullying within the organisation. Prior to his appointment as Chief, General Sreenan was one of the members of the Independent Monitoring Group (IMG) set up to address the findings of the report and to implement the necessary changes in terms of responses to bullying claims and the necessary support structures.

"We have invested considerable time and effort in dealing with the issues that came to light in the Doyle Report. We put new policies and procedures in place and we have engaged in dialogue and consultation across the organisation. We have run awareness and education programmes. Bringing about the desired changes in workplace practices, while retaining the culture of discipline necessary in a military organisation and delivering realistic training as close as possible to live operations takes a lot of time and a lot of patience. I'm satisfied that we have come a long way but I know that there is much more to be done. Success lies not in new policies and new procedures alone; it is also in the process of engagement in the issues. There is much benefit to be gained from the process of engagement, highlighting the issues, having people tease out and discuss the issues, and that process of dialogue is part of the battle.

"We have to ensure that people know what the standards are and that people understand what the demarcation lines are between robust, tough, but fair military training and improper behaviour or practices. There is a duty of care on me as COS to make sure that that kind of tough and realistic training is provided. If it isn't, you could launch people into operations unprepared and possibly at great cost. There can be no dilution of training standards but neither can people be abused in any way."