

stepping down

Interview with former RACO President Paul Allen

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Allen recently stepped down as President of RACO after four successful years at the helm of the Association. He shares his thoughts with SIGNAL.

What's your background with RACO and how did your role develop?

I contested the first elections in 1990 for the DFTC or the Curragh Command as it was then. Since that time I have been continuously involved in representation, serving three terms as a member of the National Executive, two of which as Honorary Treasurer and now I have just completed four years as President.

At the inception of representation it became quite apparent to me that if one wanted to shape the Association, there was only one place to be, and that was at the National Executive table.

I have worked on a full-time basis for the association on two separate occasions for a total period of about two and a half years. I was employed specifically for particular projects: the medical services project and the promotions system. Of the two, the most rewarding one was negotiating a promotions system and assisting in advising the promotional system with the Gen Sec and Deputy Gen Sec. That promotional system – finalised in 1997 – is still current.

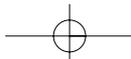
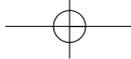
Benchmarking has been the key role of your presidency, did you envisage it as being so?

It was around 1997 that the benchmarking concept was first mooted in the Programme for Competitiveness and Work (PCW). The scheduling for submissions was not made known to RACO until January 2001 and imposed a very tight timeline which required us to carefully manage the submission we were preparing. For the first time the delineation between professional staff and elected people became absolutely clear. The professional staff in this case drafted the submission—they were the people who actually put it together on paper and researched figures. The elected people, through the National Executive, gave the project its direction and most importantly ensured that the membership was kept fully informed throughout the process.

Remember, the written submission to the Benchmarking Body had to be completed by 21st of March 2001, a short time in which to formulate and structure the Association's strategies on pay, in addition to writing and proofing RACO's

principle submission. It involved considerable work, particularly for the President. It was my responsibility to consult the membership and coordinate National Executive input. This involved weekly meetings with the National Executive, the professional staff and a continuous briefing tour to all barracks in the Defence Forces, as the project was developed.

It was a huge task and for an organisation like ours which had only three staff members, the amount of work involved was incredible. It was a time I think when RACO probably worked at its best. There was harmony between all the different branches of the Association, the concepts were well sold to our membership. We listened to the needs and requirements of our membership in face-to-face briefings during that two-month period and for the following eight months before the second written submission. Also, the job evaluation aspect of the benchmarking had to be organised with the official side. This included visits to some of our stations overseas for job evaluations at that time. It was a huge task but it was worth it. It is



true to say that it was the defining aspect of my presidency in the back of my mind I knew that it was going to be. While all the research, submissions and presentations were completed during my first term the results were not announced until my second term, so it spanned the total period.

Do you think RACO has added an extra dimension to your career in the Defence Forces?

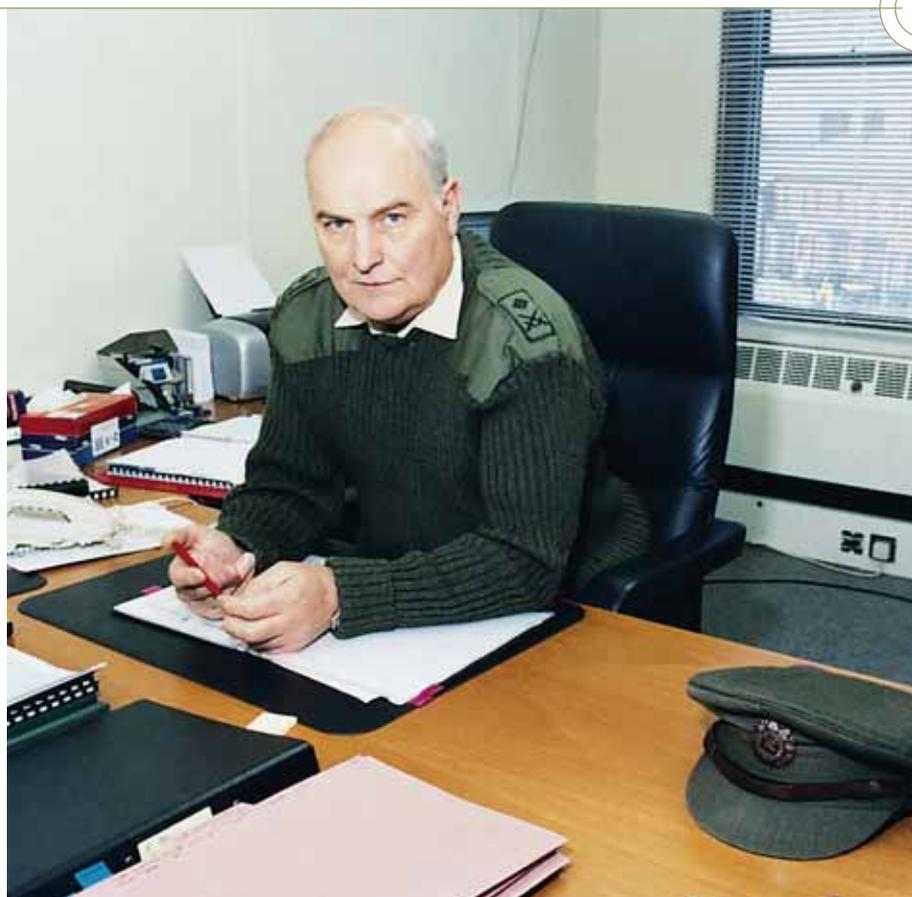
Yes it has, most definitely. The experience changes the way one approaches issues. If one is working in any organisation for over 30 years, one tends to think within the organisations' parameters. My involvement with RACO, particularly the time when I was on full-time release with the Association, enabled me to step outside those parameters so that I could look at issues from a different perspective and adopt different methodologies to address them. It also gave me a very clear insight into how the Dept of Defence and the Civil Service work. It allowed me to look at other organisations and see how they function and how their processes work.

Really it took me out of the tactical operational scene and into the strategic end of the spectrum. It required me to engage in problem solving and strategic planning on medium and long term issues, whereas within the military system, where I had been working in 1990, I was involved more with short-term to medium-term issues.

For the first time ever it became quite clear what the separation between the professional staff and the elected people was.

Do you think that the mindset required in RACO has added a new skill set to working in the field?

Many new skill sets have developed within the management and leadership of the Defence Forces over the last 10 to 14 years. They have been brought about in a large part by representation, which was really the first major change within the



Former RACO President Lt. Col. Paul Allen

Defence establishment in a long time, and it's probably one of the biggest changes in the history of the Defence Forces. That in turn led to numerous other changes in the way we in the defence community conduct our business. 'Mindset' might be the wrong word here, what is required in representation is an open mind and a pragmatic approach. This is one area where representation has contributed, in a major way, to cultural change in the Forces. A good example of this is the way in which the report from Dr Eileen Doyle was received by both the representative bodies and the military leadership. RACO accepted that report at face value, as did the Chief of Staff, thus converting what were less than complimentary findings into a positive vehicle of change. Gone was the old hiding behind the barrack wall approach to military problem solving. That did not happen overnight, I believe that it was brought about by the influence of RACO over the preceding 10 years. When a person of Dr Doyle's calibre is engaged to report on an aspect of an organisation, the best approach—the only approach – at the end of that process is to address it positively. In this way you can improve the quality of life within your workplace and we have been doing that over the last two years. RACO has had a major input into this process. The General Secretary Lieutenant Colonel Brian

O'Keeffe is a member of the Independent Monitoring Group (IMG) and through that RACO has been able to shape and influence these cultural changes to the Defence Forces. The organisation has changed fundamentally as a result of that report, and changed for the better. Representation provided the impetus for change, the Doyle Report specified the changes necessary and the IMG is implementing the changes that are resulting from this review.

It will be positive. The Defence Forces will be a much better place for all.

Lt Colonel Paul Allen is currently a Senior Staff Officer to the Director of Operations in Defence Forces Headquarters. He has served the organisation for over 34 years as a commissioned officer and is a member of the Artillery Corps and has extensive overseas service in the Middle-East and at home in a variety of appointments within the Artillery Corps, the Military College and Defence Forces Headquarters.