

# Only The STRONG Survive



Getting ready, on the starting line and on the run. The Marathon des Sables is one of the world's most gruelling endurance events.

It is not unusual for personnel from the Irish Defence Forces to achieve extraordinary feats. However most of them are done while on duty with the Defence Forces. Here's an exception though. Last April, five officers set out to complete what is undoubtedly the toughest foot racing event on the planet earth, the Marathon des Sables, an arduous 243km trek through one of the world's most unforgiving terrains, the Sahara Desert. Amazingly, all successfully completed this epic undertaking. SIGNAL reports on their amazing achievement.

The five officers who completed the Marathon paid over three thousand Euro of their own money for the prospect of running for eight hours a day across unforgiving land under a sweltering sun. Apart from the challenge to themselves they were all doing for a charity they selected personally. "That was something that also helped, that by completing the race you would be helping those that really needed it," says Lt Dave McCourt.

"The average temperature was 46 degrees celsius, that's the sort of heat that you just don't get used to," remembers Lt Ken Barry, "the days were long, the terrain was harsh but what kept

you going was the company." Comradeship is an integral part of what makes the Defence Forces a special organisation, and for these five officers the notion of successfully completing this trojan feat together was the driving force. "In a race like this you really form a bond, and it wasn't just among ourselves, the Irish officers, but with anyone else who was doing it. We were all in it together," according to Captain Tom Barry.

Training for a race of that magnitude requires dedication and commitment. "The idea originally came about over a few pints actually," says Capt Barry. "We didn't know if it would go any further but as time went on we realised that it was something that we actually wanted to do." Lt Barry says that running is an obvious part of the preparation but the amount of running the officers were doing was arousing suspicion amongst some of their colleagues. "We were on a course in the Curragh at the time and while some of the other lads were enjoying a few pints in the evening we'd be out training," he remembers. The extreme heat was also something that was almost impossible to train for. "We used to sit in a sauna for protracted lengths of time

just to help our bodies adjust a bit to very high temperatures."

So what exactly does the Marathon des Sables involve? In addition to running across a large tract of the Sahara, the Marathon also requires that all participants are completely self sufficient for the duration of the event. "We had to carry the whole lot," says Lt Dave McCourt, "food, clothes, medical kit, sleeping bag and whatever else you might need. The problem was actually assessing what we would need, which wasn't easy at all I can tell you!"



# The Marathon Of The Sands 2004



## The Race

Runners in the 19th Marathon des Sables take part in six stages, which make up the 243km distance. The common perception of the Sahara Desert is of gently undulating sand dunes as far as the eye can see. "That's not exactly true," says Capt Barry, "In fact about only 20% of the course is like that, the rest is a mix of many different terrains but mostly it was rocky or stony ground."

But there were some creature comforts, weren't there? "Well if you could

call a Berber tent a creature comfort," says Lt Barry. A Berber tent, the traditional simple nomad's tent is only covered on two sides, with both ends exposed to the elements. While you don't have to worry about rain, you do have to worry about sand. "Before the final stages, we had a day's rest and of course that day there was a small sand storm whirling around the camp," says Lt McCourt. "The sand got everywhere, in your eyes, your mouth, under your clothes, in your rucksack, not a day I'd care to repeat!"

But while the sand blizzards could make things slightly uncomfortable, experiencing and seeing what 250 km on rocky hot terrain can do to human feet was worse still. "We all suffered with our feet," says Lt Barry. "It was a daily ritual, examining what was left of your feet at the end of each stage before the beginning of the next one. There were doctors on hand to help, but it was rudimentary care. They would cut the dead skin off and pour iodine on. The pain was extreme I can tell you." While serious discomfort may have made every day a tribulation it didn't sap your determination to finish the event says Capt Barry and there was always assistance from those around you. "We all had our bad days and we did our best to support each other

but I remember one day when I was having a really tough time, a fellow competitor saw my condition and slowed his pace allowing me to follow him. That sort of thing is what makes the event so special."

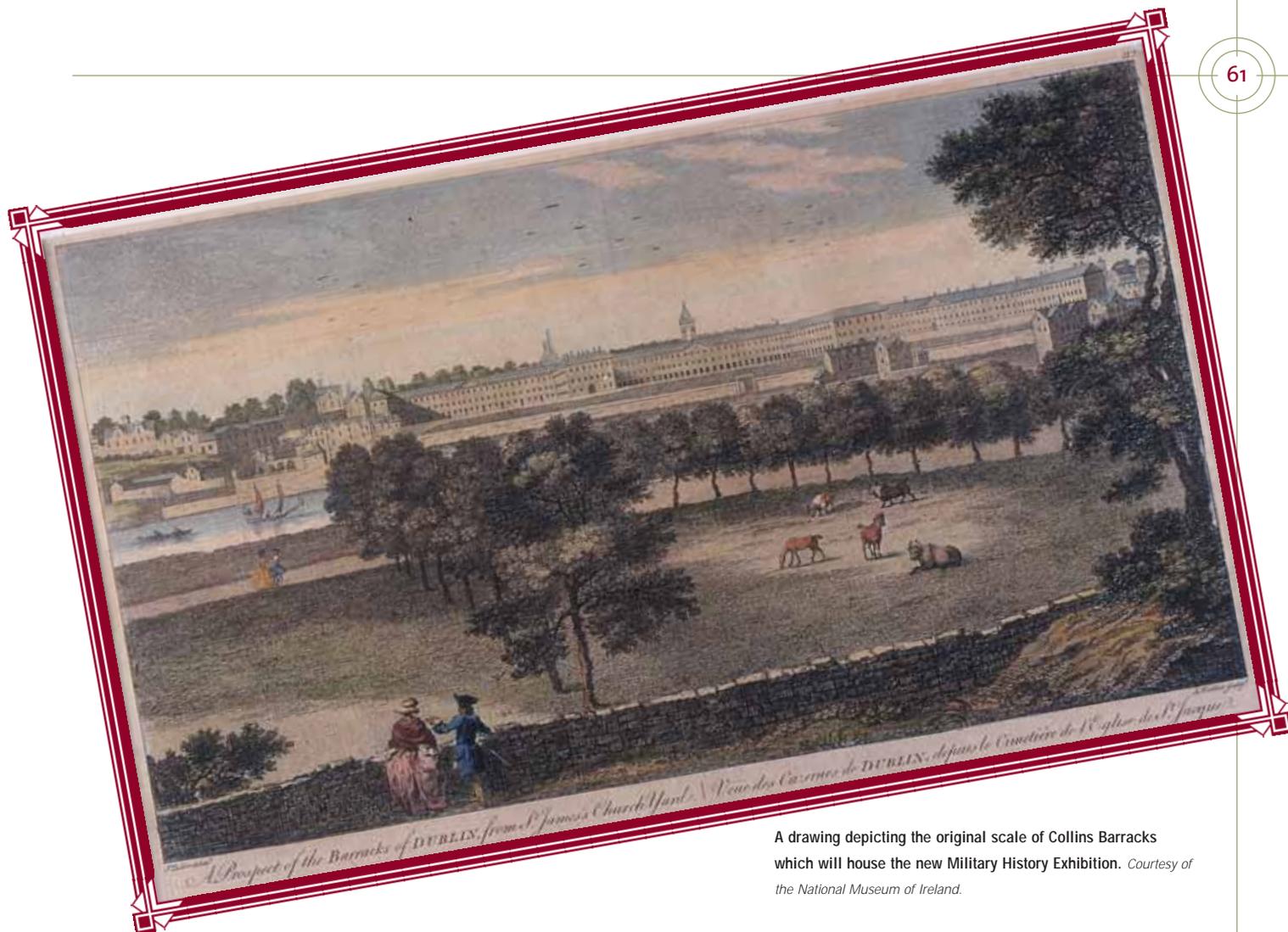
All the officers successfully completed the event and along with the other competitors were then taken away for some hard earned rest and relaxation in Morocco. "It was there that that whole emotional weight of what you had done began to become apparent," remembers Lt Barry. "It was then we really came to terms with what we had achieved." And would they do it again? "At the moment I'd say no," says Lt McCourt. "That said though, it was tough, but the achievement was worth it. A few months down the line we might see something interesting and think why not, let's give it a go."

## Charities Represented

Captain Tom Barry: Galway Assoc. for Mentally Handicapped Children. Luanshaya Zambia Orphanage  
Lieutenant Dave McCourt: Hilda's Special School  
Lieutenant Ken Barry: Nenagh World Aid Fund & Father Louis Sisti Tanzania Appeal  
Lieutenant Sean Coffey: GOAL  
Lieutenant Peter Ott: Cancer Research



(l-r) Making camp in sparse surroundings; caring for damaged feet; some well earned r&r and at the finish line, Irish officers celebrate their wonderful achievement.



A drawing depicting the original scale of Collins Barracks which will house the new Military History Exhibition. Courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland.

# ‘The Irish At War’

## A Major Irish Military History Exhibition Due To Open in 2005

**H**oused in what was reputedly the oldest continuously occupied Military Barracks in the world, the 5th Infantry Battalion walked out of the gates of Collins Barracks, Dublin, for the last time in 2000. Since then the former Barracks has formed a cornerstone of the National Museum’s policy of expansion and development. At present, the National Museum is preparing the largest ‘single-subject’ exhibition ever compiled in this country, focusing exclusively on Irish military history. ‘The Irish At War’ exhibition is massive in scale and ambitious in scope and is due to be opened to the public late in 2005.

The exhibition will tell the stories of Irish soldiers throughout the many campaigns and battles which they were involved in between the Elizabethan wars of the 16th century and the final departure of Ireland’s UNIFIL commitment from the

Lebanon in 2001. The massive historical time frame which the exhibition hopes to encompass has led to the discovery and

“ The estimated cost of the exhibition, including construction, is in the region of €9 million. ”

exposure of a vast range of highly interesting military artifacts. The Military History exhibition will, when completed, occupy a prominent place in the Museum

and according to Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism John O’Donoghue it will also mean a continuation of the historical military connections with Collins Barracks. “The Exhibition will be the largest ever undertaken to date by the National Museum and will extend to 2,000 square metres. The estimated cost of the exhibition, including construction, is in the region of €9 million,” added the Minister. The display will be separated into a series of Military History Galleries covering different themes and will also boast audio-visual features and computerised displays. Some of the different galleries include ‘The British Garrison in Ireland’, ‘Battles in Ireland’, ‘The Irish Soldier Abroad’ and ‘Soldiers of the Irish State.’ In addition to the more conventional trappings of military exhibitions, such as flags, uniforms and weapons, the exhibition has also sought to tell many personal stories, often traumatic,



Irish troops in the Lebanon. The exhibition will cover almost the entire spectrum of Irish military history.

tragic or blackly humorous in nature. Siobhan Pierce is one of the exhibition's curators: "We hope that the level of detail which we are seeking to achieve with the Military History exhibition will resonate with the Irish public and past and present members of the Irish military who may have stories to tell. We are doing our best to blend items of genuine and unique historical significance with items of a personal nature which reflected the conditions of combat and military service for Irish soldiers at the time." For instance

**“ We are interested in anything that tells a story or refers in a unique way to Irish military history ”**

the exhibition has some unique and striking pieces such the hat worn by Padraic Pearse in the GPO during the 1916 rising, the helmet of a slain Russian soldier from the Crimean War, with the tell-tale cleft of a

sabre across it. The helmet might have survived, but you can be pretty certain the Russian wearing it didn't. There are also a host of personal journals and diaries from Irish troops and many unique and amazingly decorative pieces of 'trench-art' made by hand by soldiers in the trenches of battlefields in the earlier part of the 20th Century. One of the most unique pieces is a cigarette lighter ingeniously fashioned from a spent ammunition shell.

The staff at the exhibition have received much assistance and advice from both past and present members of the Irish Defence Forces, which they much appreciate: "The guidance of officer's within the Defence Forces has been invaluable, and continues to be invaluable, throughout the collation of this major exhibition. Their insight's into the many varied chapters which make up Ireland's rich military heritage will greatly benefit the exhibition."

While the exhibition has amassed a vast quantity of material there is still a lot more to do, that is why the Museum has recently launched a National Appeal for Military History Material. "We are appealing to anyone within the Defence Forces, and indeed to general public, who might have articles or artifacts of military significance to make them available to this ambitious exhibition," adds Siobhan Pierce. "We are interested in anything that tells a story or refers in a unique way to Irish military history. What we

want to do is create an outstanding repository of Ireland's martial heritage and we really need further items to add additional depth and character to our collections."

### **The Military History Exhibition Needs You!**

In particular, the exhibition is seeking military, economic and social material relating to British Garrisons in Ireland and also relating to both military and civilians experiences from the 'Emergency' period during the Second World War. However, the museum would like to talk to anyone with material that they believe would make a valuable addition to the exhibition. For further details regarding the exhibition and making donations to it please call the exhibition office on Tel: 01 648 6467.

*Note: Donations to the National Museum of Ireland involve a full transfer of ownership, including copyright. We cannot guarantee that donated objects will be placed on exhibition, however they will become part of the national collection of Irish military material, available for research and preserved for future generations.*