

IUNVA: Remembering The Fallen And The Forgotten

The service of the Defence Forces on United Nations missions over the last five decades represents some of the finest achievements of the organisation; feats of remarkable bravery, tenacity and respect which was earned by Irish soldiers in some of the world's darkest corners. This year, which marks five decades of Irish involvement in UN overseas missions, there have been official parades

and fanfare as the achievements of Ireland's UN experience to date are rightly remembered. However, some of those who individually contributed to those achievements; the soldiers, have been virtually forgotten. Ireland has provided over 70,000 troops for tours of duty since the first volunteers served in the Congo in 1958. To date, Irish soldiers have served in over forty countries, the latest addition to the list being the UN mission in the West African country of Liberia. 85 members of the Defence Forces have died overseas and many more were wounded, injured or otherwise affected by their service abroad.

Below: Vincent Savino (left) with Isodore Fleming (middle) and Mick Prince (Right)





The Irish United Nations Veterans Association (IUNVA) has its national headquarters at Arbour House in Arbour Hill and is a fine symbol of selfless charitable work in support of UN veterans. The association, which is active nationwide, consists mainly of retired military veterans who gave decades of distinguished service to the Defence Forces; however it receives absolutely no aid or support from Government.

“Well that’s not exactly true, we do get a Christmas card,” says Major General Vincent Savino with no small degree of dark humour. “But we’re an association that exists to support each other, to support people who have served overseas and we do that effectively, though funding is always an issue.” Arbour House is the headquarters of IUNVA, also known as Post 1, with other posts around the country for veterans nationwide. There is a sense of tremendous pride within the members who congregate here; Sunday morning is the day for regular meetings but on any day there will be people there. “People who come here all have something in common and that’s what we try to foster. When you serve within the Defence Forces, camaraderie is a part of life and we try to maintain that spirit,” adds Maj Gen Savino. All around Arbour House are mementoes and testimonies to that spirit. On the walls are plaques commemorating Irish tours of duty in the Congo, the Lebanon and in many other corners of the world. There is shrapnel from an attack on an Irish post in Southern Lebanon and frequently on the walls there are mentions of Niemba. The massacre at Niemba remains the single worst loss of life suffered by the Irish military. Last year saw the 45th anniversary of the attack on an Irish patrol which saw eight soldiers killed and this was one of the few occasions when the existence of IUNVA was acknowledged at Government level by paying tribute to the achievements of IUNVA’s members”.

“Our function here is not to look at what we’re lacking in terms of

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Above: the UN Memorial in Arbour Hill

funding but instead to provide support to our members and their extended dependents with whatever means are at our disposal.” This goes from making food parcels to deliver to members who may need assistance by ensuring that widows or dependents of deceased members are also assisted if required. IUNVA are also aware that, like the serving members of the Defence Forces, they enjoy a tremendous level of public support. “We saw it again at the recent 1916 commemoration in which a large group of IUNVA members marched. We know that the work we have done is respected by the general public but we suffer from the same problem as most charities, people like to nod in our direction and applaud us but once we’ve marched past we’re quickly forgotten about again.”

Despite the constant concerns about funding and the development of the association in relation to funding, the real function of the association is clear. “As a registered charity, the work of the association is providing advice and counselling to members and their families who have been affected by their overseas service. The association also organises social, cultural and sporting events for its members. We also advocate for improvements in how veterans of the Defence Forces, particularly those with overseas UN service, are treated. For example, at present we are concerned that there is no medical backup for our members.” While IUNVA is less than impressed with how UN veterans have been treated by successive Irish governments, they are more complimentary with the support, both informal and practical, which they receive from their contemporaries within the Defence Forces. “They are very understanding and sympathetic to what we are trying to do here,” adds Maj Gen Savino. “They have helped us a lot in terms of how we function. When this association was established back in 1989, we ran it from a flat down in Stoneybatter. Arbour House itself was burnt out when it was first made available to us, but due to support from both home and overseas, we have made it into a decent HQ for the association. To the rear of the house there is space, if not the finance at present, to further improve the facilities available to members. “We have renovated the area at the back of the house to a certain extent but there is a lot more that could be

done with it. We would love to get it to a level where we could use it for some functions during the winter or where we could hold seminars or lectures. We have plenty of ideas, what we need is the resources to bring them to fruition." It is not just national solidarity which has enabled IUNVA to grow into a success story, it is the support they have received from their contemporary associations overseas, as Maj Gen Savino explains, the bond between soldiers stretches well beyond the years of active service. "We have established strong and proud links, most notably with sister associations in the UK and USA, particularly with the Royal British Legion." The Legion, which has offices in Dublin, has several options regarding funding for former members of the British armed forces but are primarily funded by the poppy appeal, which amounted to over 180,000 euro in Ireland alone during its most recent fundraiser. Within IUNVA HQ, veterans of many ages are welcome, but it is predominantly the elder generation, veterans of early days in the Congo and the Lebanon, which form the vast majority of the membership. "We have people here who were sent off to places like the Congo when they were as young as 16," explains Vincent Savino. "Of course the kit we had back then, and indeed the preparation that went into those missions, is simply incomparable to what we see today." In addition to the physical injuries sustained, there is also the cost of mental trauma, which was not even considered until relatively recently. "There are guys here who were shot or injured and had their comrades beside them shot or injured. We saw some things during our times of overseas service that simply do not go away. That said, we joined the Defence Forces because we wanted to be soldiers and it does give you a unique perspective on both life and death."

Elsewhere, the land around Arbour House is steeped in history and Defence Forces' lore. Outside the house is the memorial to those who gave their lives in the service of the United Nations on overseas duties, the flags of Ireland and the distinctive blue of the UN flag always flying. Elsewhere, in the immediate vicinity is the Defence Forces cemetery, the centrepiece of which is the plinth upon which is inscribed the Irish constitution. In front of this lie the graves of those executed during the 1916 rising. Like other serving and former members of the Defence Forces, Major General Savino is very eager



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to repair the damage which has undoubtedly been done to the relationship between those who fought in the 1916 rising and their successors in the Defence Forces. "For far too long, there have been extremists who have sought to usurp the name 'Oglaigh na hEireann' and to claim it in place of those who are its true heirs, the Defence Forces." IUNVA represents with pride some of the finest soldiers who served in defence of world peace, it honours the 85 who have paid the ultimate sacrifice and the many who today are still living the aftermath. It is a lamentable situation that they do without any official Government support or funding.



*Above right: John Condon and Dan Garland in the IUNVA headquarters in Arbour House
Left: IUNVA members pictured outside the memorial to Irish soldiers who lost their lives on UN duty.*

National IUNVA Posts		
Dublin	(01)	679 1262
Wexford	(051)	563 064
Cork City	(021)	508 014
Limerick City	(061)	315 604
Kilkenny City	(056)	776 1848
Suncroft-Curragh	(045)	432790
Cavan	(049)	436 2098
North Tipperary	(0504)	022 459
Letterkenny	(074)	26080
Westmeath	(044)	933 1977
London	(00 44)	207 6022 533
South Tipperary	(062)	52408
Fermoy	(025)	24011
Nenagh	(067)	33169
Portlaoise	(0502)	68071
North Wexford		087 927 1360
Carlow		087 937 1943
Galway	(091)	752 590
Enniscorthy	(054)	34462