



Following his election at the RACO Special Delegate Conference in April 2006, the new president of the association, Commandant Mick Baston, speaks to SIGNAL.

The President's View

“I’ve been involved in RACO for some time now and have always been very interested in the work of the association and how it has evolved since its inception. I have been involved since 1992 when I became an elected representative at Collins Barracks in Cork.” Since his initial involvement, Comdt Baston has gone on to be a RACO representative for the Southern Brigade, chairman of the Southern Brigade Committee, served as Vice-President and as a trustee for the Association. “I would like to think that my new role as President of RACO is an evolution of my involvement and it’s something I’m very proud to be taking on.”

In his two year term as president, Comdt Baston is eager to further explore many key issues in the association and any other issues which are of general concern to RACO’s membership. “I think one of the things which we must guard against in terms of officer representation is that members do not take the work of RACO for granted. We have had many successes over the past fifteen years and we must guard against complacency and ensure that our members retain a strong level of interest in the work of the association. The representatives and executive members of RACO must therefore continue to ensure that we continue to communicate our message frequently and clearly.”

Throughout his 31 year career in the Defence Forces, Comdt Baston has worked

in a wide variety of roles both at home and overseas. He has completed 3 tours of duty in the Lebanon with UNIFIL, 2 in Kosovo (one with KFOR and the other with OSCE/ UNMIK) and one with the MINURSO mission in Western Sahara. In Ireland he is currently Officer Commanding the 1st Field Artillery Regiment of the Southern Brigade, based in Cork. He was commissioned in 1975 as part of the 51st Cadet Class. The overseas work of officers in the Defence Forces is something which now, he believes, virtually defines the achievements of many officers in the organisation.

“The defence architecture that we now deal with as Defence Forces officers has changed remarkably over recent years, we are now presented with a much wider palette

of challenges, more increasingly in the overseas environment. We have moved from the traditional peace keeping missions, like UNIFIL in Lebanon, to more robust Multi National Peace Enforcing missions, like UNMIL in Liberia and KFOR in Kosovo. When we look at UNMIL in particular, with its Quick Reaction Force (QRF) capability, it represents a change from the 'ground holding' operation to a far more fluid operational doctrine. Other operations, such as Operation Althea in Bosnia and projected EU operational assignments and the possibility of working in the EU Battlegroups make this an exciting time to be an officer in the Defence Forces," Comdt Baston says. During his recent terms of overseas service, he has specialised in the emerging area of Civil Military Relations/ Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC). He has since lectured extensively on the concept both at home and abroad – most recently in Mongolia.

On the home front, there have also been many changes and Michael is happy that RACO has been to the forefront of those changes. "When RACO was born in the early nineties, the Defence Forces was undergoing massive organisational change. This has affected every part of the Defence Forces. This change has been implemented by the officers of the Defence Forces, who took ownership, as leaders and managers within the Defence Forces, to drive and manage this change. We have seen officers, at every rank, successfully meeting all the challenges that the Defence Forces has faced such as the White Paper on Defence, UN Reform, NATO/PfP membership, European Security and Defence developments and the effect of International Terrorism. Furthermore, officers have indeed increased the efficiency and effectiveness of the Defence Forces during this time with fewer personnel and limited finance. During this time I believe RACO has proven that it is an effective tool for the officer as an individual."

Mick Baston points out that RACO has dealt with the key issues of pay and conditions, and promotion in a very effective and successful manner and to the satisfaction of the majority of its members. "We have recently completed the first two phases of the Association's submissions on pay to the Public Service Benchmarking Body consisting of the main written submission to the Body and the completion of job

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Comdt Baston maintains that RACO members of all ranks must be actively involved.

evaluation questionnaires (JEQs) by a sample of over 80 officers. The next phase of this project entails an oral presentation to the Body and the Association has been invited to deliver a presentation on its submission in November. The central theme of our submission is that the job of the military officer has increased in size and value since the last benchmarking exercise and that the demands of the job will continue to increase into the future. Nobody could have anticipated the scale and pace of developments in international peace support operations or international terrorism and the major changes these would require in all aspects of the Defence Forces. Because of these developments the organisation was required to simultaneously change its operational focus and develop greatly enhanced capabilities in a very short time. Therefore, to sustain the world-class Defence Forces we must continue to recruit and retain high calibre officers. We now have to explain to the Body that overseas participation now impacts everything the organisation does."

Aware of the importance of keeping members informed of developments within the Association, he intends to keep officers appraised of developments in the pay benchmarking process via an elected representatives seminar later this year and also through visits to the various Defence Forces formations."

Comdt Baston also points to the proactive and forthright way which RACO has dealt with some of the more difficult and challenging issues which have affected the Defence Forces recently. Examples of this approach include the Doyle Report in 2002 on harassment and bullying in the organisation, the subsequent Independent Monitoring Group (IMG) and the establishment late last year of the Defence Forces Ombudsman's office have all proceeded with the active participation and cooperation of RACO. "All these things were just parts of a greater overhaul, a greater drive for change within the Irish military. We are not immune to change and we have to shape and manage it. The Defence Forces is not a normal workplace and as such we must cooperate with factors that help contribute to improving the well-being and welfare of the officers who work in the Defence Forces. I look forward to the next two challenging years of playing my part as RACO President in achieving even more successes on behalf of the members of the Association."

