



Media & The Military

Tom Brady, Irish Independent Security Correspondent, reflects on his experiences in over three decades covering Defence related matters.

Defence was at the very bottom of the Cabinet portfolios when I first became a security correspondent thirty four years ago. The military were regarded generally by Dáil deputies with aspirations of achieving high office as a Cinderella grouping and being their political master was not high on their wish list, despite the role being played by the Defence Forces' in safeguarding the security of the State. Taoisigh usually left Defence towards the end when allocating the prized cabinet posts and the hot seat was normally occupied by a Minister who was nearing the end of a lengthy career or a younger politician who was either being introduced gently to the premier league or being rewarded for electoral or geographical reasons.

The political view was also reflected within the Department of Defence where the civil servants throughout the Seventies and into the early Eighties did not regard themselves as high flyers and most were content to keep the head down and avoid controversy. Good media relations were not a key objective and the response to queries

from the press usually varied from being a joke to a disaster. At one stage, the service being provided by the Department was so poor that the government press spokesman agreed to personally step into the breach and field the Defence queries.

It continued to be a media backwater until a highly competent and opinionated young official, who had been transferred into Defence on promotion from the Department of Finance, took over the role of media spokesman. Even at that early stage in his career, it was clear that Michael Howard was destined for better things (he is now the Secretary General at the Department of Defence) and his handling of his brief, even when his Minister was not the sharpest knife in the cabinet, quickly brought him to the notice of a wider audience.

In contrast, the military had got their media act together much earlier, thanks

Tom Brady, Irish Independent Security Correspondent.

mainly to the appointment of a young Commandant, Vinnie Savino, as the Forces' press officer. Savino was like a breath of fresh air to the media in the Seventies and his ability to deliver a swift and accurate response ensured that his organisation generally received good press.

One of his biggest attributes was his cool-headed performance under media fire and his detailed off the record briefings were often accompanied by some witty remarks. Most reporters respected the off-record status of his comments but on one occasion he was let down by a journalist who reported his jocular jibe that a British Army incursion on the Border was probably the result of an officer reading his map upside down.

The remark sparked off a diplomatic row and some of his superiors immediately buckled and were prepared to remove Savino from the press office. But to his eternal credit, the then Defence Minister, Paddy "thundering disgrace" Donegan held firm and insisted he stay at his post. The incident obviously did not impede his inevitable rise through the ranks and he retired as a major general after a distinguished career; he is now a very active and energetic President of the Irish UN Veterans Association (IUNVA).

Stand Up and Fight

During the Seventies and Eighties there were no representative associations to press the case of the military for a wage rise and it was left to individual officers to highlight the many services provided by the Forces' to the nation and the poor wages soldiers received in return. Most Chiefs of Staff stayed behind their desks and accepted whatever their political masters threw at them.

But a fine exception was Carl O'Sullivan, who was prepared to speak his mind on behalf of his troops and was not afraid to criticise the Government for abusing the loyalty of the military by ordering soldiers to intervene in strikes and act as binmen.

A small group of less senior officers got together around the same time and decided some action had to be taken to ensure that the military got a better pay deal. Armed with ammunition provided by the group, the Evening Press, where I was then security correspondent, waged a relentless campaign for a rise in wages for the troops.

The then Minister, Bobby Molloy, later confided that his Government had agreed on a special wage rise of 4pc for the military but the feedback from our campaign impacted heavily on the doorsteps and forced Ministers to double the increase to 8pc.

Some of that group were later to form the nucleus of a body that eventually evolved into RACO, which immediately moved into the frontline with its sister association, PDFORRA, and fought a series of



*Former Chief of Staff Lt
Gen Dave Stapleton.*

bloody and often successful battles with the Minister, the Department and sometimes the military top brass until public service pay benchmarking produced a peace process.

The birth of the representative associations and their early skirmishes with authority, particularly the threatened arrest of Michael Martin at Dublin airport, provided some of the most exciting stories of the past three and a half decades. That era also produced some of the most hilarious yarns including the futile efforts of Fianna Fáil's Michael "Cowshed" Noonan to avoid the clutches of the protesting army wives as he tried to slip out a side door at the Curragh camp.

White Paper on Defence

The infamous White Paper on Defence in 2000 and the shameful attempts by the Department to reduce the strength of the Permanent Defence Forces to 8,500 brought about a rare show of public unity in the military ranks as the General Staff played their part alongside the representative associations in resisting the cuts and, in the end, an honourable compromise was reached.

There was no doubt that the organisation had been badly in need of an overhaul to achieve what Noel Dempsey once described, after a visit to the peacekeeping troops in South Lebanon, as creating an army at home to resemble the one operating overseas. But some of the early attempts were heavy-handed and a lot of working relationships were severely strained before an acceptable formula was drafted.

Many commentators were dubious that the promise that savings achieved as a result of the cutback in numbers would be ploughed back into Defence spending; but Michael Smith, and his successor, Willie O'Dea both ensured that those pledges would be kept and their performances at the Cabinet table gave Defence a higher profile politically than it had enjoyed under many of its previous ministers.

Military Speak

It's healthy for the Defence Forces if the Chief of Staff and the Minister are not joined at the hip. And there was certainly no likelihood of the then Minister, Michael Smith and then Chief of Staff Dave Stapleton becoming conjoined twins during the cuts debate. Earlier this year, an attempt was made to create the impression that Willie O'Dea and Lieutenant General Jim Sreenan were in danger of drifting apart following the leaking of a directive, signed by the Minister, reminding the Chief of the restrictions on his ability to speak his mind in the media.

But it quickly emerged that the directive was the handiwork of a civil servant and while the Minister was silly to sign a memo he obviously had not considered in any depth, it was clear that it did not represent his personal views. That was obvious a couple of weeks later when Mr O'Dea's comments in Lebanon underlined what the Chief had stated in his non-controversial interview in the Irish Times last December.

Indeed, the relationship between the Minister and the General during the Lebanon trip was probably warmer than it had been on any previous occasion together overseas.

Reputation in Peacekeeping

The Lebanon experience has been good for the Defence Forces. The length of the previous stay there was obviously too long and a change of venue was badly needed to broaden the overseas experience of the troops and provide more variety in their missions. But, despite the widely stated view at the time of the pullout, there was little opposition to a return south of the Litani river last November.

The performance of the Irish troops, of all ranks, in Lebanon ensured that the Defence Forces became a key component of the United Nations peacekeeping set-up and individual performances like the role played by Jim Sreenan, in his role in 1999 and 2000 as Deputy Force Commander of UNIFIL in Lebanon, in expanding the UN zone out to the Israeli border, earned worldwide respect for the military.

“The relationship between the Minister and the General during the Lebanon trip was probably warmer than it had been on any previous occasion together overseas”

The reputation built up by the military on the world stage has benefited Ireland in many other areas internationally and, hopefully, a repeat performance in the new EU battlegroup will influence the politicians at home to show greater respect for the overseas role rather than playing petty games over the so-called triple lock mechanism.

The fall-out from the Northern peace process has reduced the operational pressure on the troops at home and allowed greater concentration on training and preparing for military tasks abroad. But one key area, military intelligence, continues to operate efficiently, with international terrorists replacing the home-grown activists as the number one target. At one time, the phrase, military intelligence, was regarded as an oxymoron but it is no longer the butt of jokes and it fits neatly alongside the Garda security and intelligence section.

Times of Peace

Externally, the military have finally managed to achieve their own niche and there is no longer any talk politically of cutting numbers or trying to find out what role they actually fill. Internally, the organisation seems more at ease with itself. Maybe, that's because it has a hardcore of personnel who remember the bad times but fought the fight with distinction and won. Maybe, it's the influence of the women, who are beginning to make their mark in what was an all-male preserve not too long ago.

Or, maybe, it's that the full-time leadership of RACO has become middle-aged.