

Members of the 90th Infantry Battalion on patrol in the northern Banga region of Liberia.



Liberia

Waking from the Nightmare

The Irish Defence Forces & UNMIL.

After almost 14 solid years of bloody civil war, which claimed over 250,000 lives, the West African country of Liberia is slowly opening its eyes to a world which had largely forgotten it. SIGNAL reports on the work of Irish troops with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). *By Ruairi Kavanagh. Photos by Comdt Willie Dwyer.*



From Left:Defence Minister Michael Smith reviewing Irish troops in Liberia. (Top Right) UNMIL COS Brig Gen Bob Fitzgerald (centre) and Lt Col Paddy Moran (right) discussing plans alongside Namibian UNMIL counterparts near Robertsport. (right) Irish Troops from the 90th Infantry Battalion on patrol after disembarking from a Ukrainian helicopter.



“I ready the country has come a long way from the horror of last summer, when the civil war came crashing down on the capital Monrovia in waves of random killing”

Liberia has been through hell. It was once classified, in the 1970s, as a middle-income country. It is now regarded as a failed state. The 3.1 million (approx.) people of Liberia have been profoundly affected by the conflict. A quarter of a million people have lost their lives during the civil war. Most were civilian noncombatants.

1.3 million, almost half the population of the country, have been displaced or are refugees. Abductions, torture, rape and other human rights atrocities have taken place on a massive scale. Following the exile of its embattled and despotic President, Charles Taylor, in August of last year, the United Nations moved quickly to fill the vacuum. Today, the United Nations Mission In Liberia (UNMIL), made up of forces from many nations are helping Liberians take the difficult first steps towards reintegration into the modern world. It is sure to be a long process, but already it is one that has been helped immensely by the presence of 471 Irish troops there, part of the 90th Infantry Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Patrick (Paddy) Moran. In addition, Irish influence is strong at the very pinnacle of UNMIL with Brigadier General Robert (Bob) Fitzgerald assigned the role as Chief of

Staff for all UNMIL forces, a very prestigious assignment for the General and indeed for the Irish Defence Forces.

A Shadow State

“It’s the small things you see that make you realise that somehow, this country has a chance of making it, of establishing itself as a successful, free and stable country,” says Brig Gen Bob Fitzgerald. “The other day I was driving through Monrovia, and I noticed schoolchildren emerging from the narrow little alleys around the city. What struck me was how well presented they were, in blue, white or green uniforms. It’s amazing how, in a city that has been without water or electricity for such a long time, families are able to get their children so presentable and to send them to school. That’s a sign of the pride of some of these people, and a verification that they want a normal life. That’s what we’re trying to help



them achieve." While it is very early days, there has undeniably been progress. Already the country has come a long way from the horror of last summer, when the civil war came crashing down on the capital Monrovia in waves of random killing and gangs of child soldiers roaming with impunity. Today there is the beginnings of a dialogue and peace process. The Irish 90th Infantry Battalion is located at Camp Clara, a short distance from the capital. The camp is situated in the grounds of the derelict Hotel Africa, a former favourite with exiled President Charles Taylor. The organisation of the Irish base there now is a far cry from what the Irish confronted when they arrived late last November.

"I remember seeing termite mounds 15 foot high," remembers Lt Col Paddy Moran, O/C 90th Infantry Battalion. "The hotel had obviously been quite a place in its day but now it was a decaying shell, crawling with insects and snakes." Lt Col Moran was part of the advance group sent to the country. "We were deploying into the unknown, that was the first thing that set this mission apart. Our job with the advance group was

Comdt Gary McKeon Welfare Officer 90 Infantry Battalion, UNMIL.

"My role with the Irish troops in UNMIL is to provide some acceptable level of comfort and facilitate a degree of leisure activities for our troops while they're stationed here. In a disused chalet here we set up some pool tables, table football and board games. We also stockpiled our collection of books in the form of a small library. We're very happy with the large television too and our satellite connection which enables us to tune into live football or the latest films. This is a hard, tough and dangerous mission so what we're trying to do is provide a decent level of leisure activities. We have also managed to construct a small stage area in Camp Clara and fixed it up with sound equipment. We're fortunate enough to have some excellent musicians on deployment with us who often use the opportunity to get up on stage. For special occasions we have also sourced a local band that are quite good. We have landlines here and troops can purchase phone cards to make relatively inexpensive calls home. In terms of mobile phone use,

it's quite popular, troops can buy local sim cards to fit into their phones. It's a very expensive way of making calls but again it's a comfort item for the troops and their families back home, who know they have a number they can contact them on. In terms of online services we have a set of 12 Personal Computers set up, these allow our soldiers easy access to email and internet surfing capabilities. The accommodation blocks also each have their own rest and recreation rooms, with books, games and often a television. All the sleeping quarters are air conditioned too, which is imperative in a tropical climate like this. The provision of all these amenities to troops abroad is something which has had a lot more attention paid to it recently, I have to say that we've been very well supported by the DF organisation back home. However, there is always room for improvement and we will continue to add to the facilities here and improve them for all. It is appreciated that UNMIL is a difficult and dangerous mission and we have been given good resources to ensure we have a suitable level of welfare available to troops stationed here in Camp Clara."



to formulate our plans and establish our camp. When we arrived here, it was apparent that we were entering a country that was backward and remote but strangely beautiful in its own untamed way." The advance group arrived in Liberia to meet a situation which Lt Col Moran describes as "chaotic". "It was clear straight away why this mission had been deemed a Chapter 7 (Peace Enforcement) mission. There was no shape on any aspect of law or order here, no police force and no civil structures. Liberia had really ceased to exist as a country." For Liberia to operate effectively as a nation again, the security and stability of Monrovia is key. It is difficult to properly estimate the population of the city in a country where there have been huge amounts of displaced people on the move throughout the course of the Civil War. The estimated (2000) population of Liberia is in the region of three million. "The city is the key to rebuilding the country, all the different factions involved in the war had their leadership contingents in Monrovia, so we had to address the situation there first."

Irish Involvement

Make no mistake; Irish troops in Liberia are deployed in what is potentially a very dangerous place. This is a United Nations

Chapter Seven (Peace Enforcement) Mission for a reason, a reason that is apparent on the streets of Monrovia. "There is quite a large population in the city and we know that there are still many arms caches hidden in the city. When we go into Monrovia, we go in MOWAG Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC's) and we go in force", says Lt Col Moran. The city itself is a mixture of sub-standard buildings and shanty town, with very little in the way of anything recognisable as a modern building. There is absolutely no architectural heritage in Monrovia. "It is undoubtedly a very dangerous place," says Lt Col Moran. The Irish are patrolling a land where lynch-mob law has been prevalent for many years and still holds sway in parts. There are also the elements of tribalism and sacrificial culture which are totally unique to each particular culture. It is believed that in Liberia over 70% of the population practice indigenous tribal beliefs. "You can take absolutely nothing for granted here." That said, Irish troops in Liberia have been very well received by the local population. "Almost without exception that has been the case. I think our conduct here has defined us as honest brokers for peace and I think that the vast majority of the people here accept that." The status of Irish troops in Liberia



From Left: UNMIL COS Brig Gen Bob Fitzgerald (centre) and Lt Col Paddy Moran in dialogue with a Pakistani UNMIL officer. (Above left) Irish Mowag's in UN livery arrive in Monrovia. (Above right) Irish personnel providing security at Monrovia port.

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was also boosted by the actions of the Army Ranger Wing earlier this year when they carried out a successful operation to release over 35 mistreated hostages, held captive in a truck container in a north-eastern region of the country. “Successful operations like that, and that wasn’t the only one, received a lot of publicity here and it has helped boost our profile among the Liberian people,” adds Lt Col Moran. As the commanding officer of the Quick Reaction Force (QRF), Lt Col Moran has a constantly evolving task, which involves continuous intelligence analysis, formulation of strategy and liaising with other commanders within UNMIL. “The days are long here and the work is hard, we’re kept busy from 6am until Midnight most days. But this is as good as it gets in terms of challenges for an officer. The challenges are major but rewarding.” Lt Col Moran says that the UNMIL challenge represents yet another example of how good the Irish Defence Forces are at this kind of work. “We are very professional in this type of environment, I would even say that we underestimate how professionally we operate. Our daily, weekly and monthly taskings are done to an established code, an established approach that we have always found to be successful. Everything is done according to our teachings back home.

It has stood us in very good stead. At no stage has anything been done in an ad hoc fashion, there has been absolutely no deviation from good military principles. Of course good preparation is vital, and we had good preparation, but really until you get into the theatre of operations here you can’t really formulate how you’re going to work. We’ve had to adjust, but we’ve been ideally prepared to do that.” Part of the UNMIL setup involves working across a broad range of military cultures, from the Nigerians and Ethiopians to the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis. “We’ve established a good working relationship, we’re very well received by them and I think our professionalism and interoperability has become very apparent.”

In Command

Brigadier General Bob Fitzgerald, Military Chief of Staff with the UNMIL mission, carries a considerable burden of military command. Under his command he has approximately 15,000 uniformed troops. Speaking from his office in Monrovia he told SIGNAL of the many challenges and responsibilities facing UNMIL. “I’ve been involved in UNMIL from the very start, so I suppose you could say that I’m well positioned to analyse how we’ve been performing to date,” says Brig Gen

Commandant Willie O’Dwyer Military Information Officer (MIO), 90 Infantry Battalion, UNMIL

“Deployment in Liberia is a complex, ever-changing challenge. My role as Military Information Officer (MIO) is to provide relevant information to our troops via our command structures on all aspects of local information and intelligence. This would include profiles of the various ethnic groups and warring factions within Liberia and briefings as to their current status and the key personalities within each faction, tribe or ethnic group. This involves constant situational analysis of what is happening here and of course establishing relationships with people who can provide us with the information we require. As part of establishing, maintaining and profiting from these relationships, we have become very involved with the DDRR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration and Rehabilitation) process. This is essentially a disarmament process aimed at providing a level of reintegration into society following disarmament. It’s obviously a major challenge for us in a society where carrying arms became the accepted norm for so long. Working within this process, I use many of my contacts to establish an understanding among the many groups who are expected to take part within this programme. I then, through regular briefings, update the relevant personnel of any developments which may have occurred. The real challenge for Liberia will be the scheduled 2005 elections. That will be the acid test to see if this country can make the successful transition from the gun to the ballot box and, as we know that can be a problem. There is undoubtedly a long road ahead for the country, but I’ll leave Liberia with more hope than exasperation and safe in the knowledge that Irish troops here are providing a vital role within UNMIL.”



Fitzgerald. "I arrived in neighbouring Sierra Leone on October 6th as part of the early deployment phase and met with other officers who were going to be working with me in HQ here. I came into Liberia on October 11th. It's hard to describe what Liberia, particularly Monrovia, was like when I arrived here. It was completely dead, there was nothing. It was the clearest representation I had ever seen of a failed state. There was a certain level of security in Monrovia thanks to the Nigerian-led Economic Community of West African

States (ECOWAS) presence. However, it was a city left completely neglected since 1990; no electricity, no running water, no sewerage services, absolutely nothing and the most abject poverty I have ever seen." Working in the sweltering humidity of Liberia in the midst of a complete breakdown in society norms, Brig Gen Fitzgerald became aware of the massive tasks ahead. "Outside Monrovia, and the ECOWAS/ECOMIL patrolled zone, there was nothing except gun law and people existed according to the whims of the various factions. This country

Army Ranger Wing Rescue Mission Boosts Defence Force's Profile In Liberia

The Defence Forces Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) based in Liberia detained members of the renegade Government of Liberia (GOL) forces in an operation 300 KM North East of the capital Monrovia on January 6th this year.

The patrol, consisting of members of the Defence Forces Army Ranger Wing (ARW) was inserted by Ukrainian Mi26 helicopter, at 1200hrs, to Gbapa in the northern sector of Nimba County, close to the border with Guinea. Local civilians reported that there were over 30 people being held captive against their will by renegade Government of Liberia (GOL) forces, in a 20 foot container near the town of Yekepa. On foot of the information received, the Army Ranger Wing patrol secured the release of the 35 captives (male and female) and detained the commander and deputy commander of the GOL force. Other militia members are believed to have fled on arrival of the Army Ranger Patrol. The renegades are currently being held in a local police station which is being secured by the Army Ranger Wing patrol. Many of the 35 persons released were brought to the local medical facility for treatment as a result of alleged beatings and rapes inflicted upon them while in captivity.



is about 80% tropical jungle, so holding the roads represents real power, and it was on the roads that most of the skirmishes and small battles in the civil war were fought." In Monrovia itself, there wasn't a high level of weapon visibility but in other regions of the country where we hadn't yet deployed we had to assess the threat levels in each of these faction controlled areas and discuss how we were going to effectively deploy our troops. We had to work out the location, accommodation and logistics while also dealing with warring factions who still effectively controlled these areas." In the early days of UNMIL, negotiating the murky waters of tribal politics, required a mixture of diplomacy and an aggressive stance.

Make no mistake; Irish troops in Liberia are deployed in what is potentially a very dangerous place

"You don't want to use large scale military power, pushing through road blocks and firing weapons unless you have to. We could have done it but it wouldn't always have been the most appropriate action at the time. Excessive force at the wrong time would only cause many more problems than it would solve. There were confrontations when we were trying to deploy, when our convoys might have been blocked, and then you had to adapt a more aggressive posture and eventually force the issue. Of course, militarily, they couldn't compete with UNMIL's armoured capability. It was during the deployment phase that the presence of Irish troops as part of the Quick Reaction Force was particularly beneficial. For example, if a Pakistani unit was deploying, the Irish would be available as backup and if there was any potential trouble, a visible display of force in the shape of MOWAG APC's was very effective in calming any situation.



Brief History Liberia: 1989 – 2003

Civil war in Liberia claimed the lives of almost 150,000 people – mostly civilians – and led to a complete breakdown of law and order. It displaced scores of people, both internally and beyond the borders, resulting in some 850,000 refugees in the neighbouring countries. Fighting began in late 1989, and by early 1990, several hundred deaths had already occurred in confrontations between government forces and fighters who claimed membership in an opposition group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by a former government official, Mr. Charles Taylor.

From the outset of the conflict, a subregional organization, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), undertook various initiatives aimed at a peaceful settlement. The United Nations supported ECOWAS in its efforts to end a civil war. These efforts included establishing, in 1990, an ECOWAS's observer force, the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG). The Security Council in 1992 imposed an arms embargo on Liberia, and the Secretary-General appointed a Special Representative to assist in talks between ECOWAS and the warring parties.

After ECOWAS brokered a peace agreement in Cotonou, Benin, in 1993, the Security Council established the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL). Its task was to support ECOMOG in implementing the Cotonou peace agreement.

Delays in the implementation of the peace agreement and resumed fighting among Liberian factions made it impossible to hold elections as planned in February/March 1994, as scheduled. With the ceasefire in force, the United Nations successfully observed the conduct of the elections in July 1997. Mr. Charles Taylor was elected President. Following his inauguration on 2 August 1997, President Taylor formed a new Government and announced a

From Left: (Far left) UNMIL COS Bob Fitzgerald examining weaponry with Swedish troops on APC patrol. (Middle Left) Defence Minister Michael Smith arriving at Camp Clara alongside former Chief of Staff Colm Mangan (right) and Lt Col Paddy Moran. (Left) Minister of State Tom Kitt TD presents shamrock to Irish O/C Lt Col Paddy Moran during a visit on St Patrick's Day.

policy of reconciliation and national unity. UNOMIL's principal objective was achieved.

However, the peace-building efforts were seriously hindered by the inability of the Government and opposition party leaders to resolve their differences over key issues of governance. These elements contributed to the resumption of civil war in Liberia.

On 8 July 2003, as fighting between Government forces and various warring factions intensified and humanitarian tragedy threatened, the Secretary-General decided to appoint Jacques Paul Klein of the United States his Special Representative for Liberia. He was entrusted with the task of coordinating the activities of the United Nations agencies in Liberia and supporting the emerging transitional arrangements. On 29 July, the Secretary-General outlined a three-phased deployment of international troops to Liberia, leading to a multidimensional United Nations peacekeeping operation. He also indicated that, in view of the appointment of Mr. Klein, and the envisaged establishment of a United Nations operation in Liberia, the mandate of UNOL would naturally have to be terminated.

Since that time the situation in Liberia has developed rapidly. On 1 August 2003, the Security Council adopted resolution 1497 (2003), authorizing the establishment of a multinational force in Liberia and declaring its readiness to establish a follow-on United Nations stabilisation force to be deployed no later than 1 October 2003. On 18 August 2003, the Liberian parties signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Accra. By that Agreement, the parties requested the United Nations to deploy a force to Liberia under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations to support the National Transitional Government of Liberia and assist in the implementation of the Agreement.

Irish troops form a vital cog in the fledgling UNMIL Mission.

“As UNMIL Chief of Staff I can proudly say that the Irish troops here have set the standard”

Deployment in accordance with a Chapter Seven mission required acute tactical know-how and while Brig Gen Fitzgerald says that there were political considerations in terms of deploying UNMIL troops to the more remote parts of the country, the one inescapable fact is that Monrovia has to remain secure; it is absolutely fundamental to the success of the mission. “If Monrovia falls to warring factions and violence again, UNMIL has failed.” Brig Gen Fitzgerald’s role is centralised in Monrovia and his main task is to ensure that all the UNMIL systems work. “There is obviously a massive logistical and operational setup and I’m involved in all aspects of that. From intelligence analysis and systems management to equipment management, there is a very large amount of work for us all to do here to ensure that UNMIL operates effectively. Overall I have to say I’m enjoying the challenge, it’s a huge responsibility and I’ve been involved in it from the very start seeing the force and its Headquarters grow from infancy. As UNMIL Chief of Staff I can proudly say that the Irish troops here have set the standard, from the Army Ranger Wing to the battalion members, they are doing a wonderful job. They are the consummate peacekeeping professionals and operate with a great deal of confidence. They are a credit to themselves, the country and to the Defence Forces.” Brig Gen Fitzgerald is scheduled to return home in late autumn or early winter but as yet admits that he could possibly spend more time in Liberia. As for the Defence Forces, whose initial commitment to UNMIL is for one year, does the General envisage and hope that their commitment to the mission will be extended? “UNMIL is benefitting greatly from the presence of Irish troops as part of the mission. I hope it is something that can continue in line with the Government’s strategy for the deployment.



Liberia: Guide To Major Factions

There were many factions and tribal groups involved in Liberia’s protracted civil war. The following is a brief guide to the three largest and most influential groups.

LURD

Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) was an insurgency and opposition group that, during the Civil War, sought the removal of the Taylor government. The group structure is divided between the military campaign designed to oust Taylor and the political campaign to restore law and order in Liberia.

LURD was formed in 1999 by Liberian refugees in West Africa led by Sekou Conneh, and is the largest insurgency group in the state. LURD was supported by Guinea from the outset, and has received the tacit support of Britain and the United States. Initially, LURD used Guinea as a base, and it received religious, political and military support from the Muslim-dominated government of Guinea. LURD is split along ethnic lines, with Krahn, Mandingo and Gio factions. The leader of LURD is a Mandingo and it is understood that seventy percent (70%) of their forces are of the Mandingo ethnic group. The LURD is a coalition of ethnic Mandingos and Krahns, although many ethnic Lorma are members of the rebel group as well.

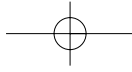
MODEL

In early 2003 a dissident movement known as the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) surfaced in the south-eastern region of Liberia. MODEL was

described by one of the LURD leaders, Joe Willie, in an interview on 9 April 2003 with the BBC radio “as an integrated force...” of LURD. According to reports by local newspapers, MODEL appears to be the result of the breaking apart of LURD. However, this new group, during the Civil War, gained ground in the south-eastern counties, namely, the regions of Grand Gedeh, Sinoe and Grand Kru. Its main target seemed to be the port of Buchanan in Grand Bassa County, from where the Government of Liberia was exporting the country’s major produce, timber. On 27 April 2003, fighters belonging to MODEL engaged in a major battle to take the town of Greenville, the main port of south-eastern Liberia, where several logging companies based their operations.

GOL

The Government of Liberia (GOL) forces were the military manifestation of Charles Taylor’s chaotic regime. Not consistent by any normal military guidelines, they frequently utilised the same military malpractices as other factions during the 14- year Civil War. Predominantly made up of the Gio and Manoh tribes, GOL troops stronghold was Monrovia during the years of Charles Taylor’s reign as President (1997-2003). However their spiritual heartland is far from the capital, predominantly Nimba county in the North Eastern part of the country, close to the borders with Guinea and the Ivory Coast. Since the exile of President Taylor to Nigeria last year, GOL factions have remained active in these areas. However, according to UNMIL figures, the GOL have been one of the more cooperative of the major factions in terms of disarmament.



Brave

The Irish Air Corps and the Pilatus PC-9M

