

'Our Man In Dublin'

Interview with US Military Attaché to Ireland Colonel John O'Sullivan



Colonel O'Sullivan has served at the United States Embassy in Dublin as the Defence Attaché for over two years. Over his career he has been in some interesting locations at some very interesting times. Now, here in Ireland, he acts as a conduit between the United States military and the Irish Defence Forces. He speaks to SIGNAL.

Career Background

"I suppose I'm a mixture of many things," says Col. O'Sullivan. "My primary role over the past few years as a United States Army Officer has been that of a Foreign Area Officer (FAO), but I started as an Artillery Officer, completing all the assignments I could in that role up through Field Artillery battalion command. Most of my tactical

assignments were in light infantry type units. The US Army is different from the other services in that officers are selected and trained to serve as Foreign Area specialists early in their careers and then return to unit level assignments. Officers, generally Captains who have commanded at Company level, are selected to be a FAOs, and sent for specialised training. Training



includes language courses, graduate studies and in-country training and travel. In my case, after graduating from language and graduate school, it was time for two years of in-country training, in my case Germany, my area of expertise being the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe." This was the late eighties, an interesting time to be on the front line of the cold war, as it was a period of profound change in Europe. There, with a background in artillery command, John found himself facing many different challenges. "It was obviously a time of great change in that part of the world and I was involved in studying the changes in the political military environment and working on arms control treaties - something which I have a background in - but I love a challenge." One of the reasons that John found life as an FAO so intriguing and challenging was his love of languages and the total immersion in different cultures. "I found myself becoming enthralled with linguistics; one of the original reasons I became so interested in becoming an FAO. At that time in the United States military, officers had two paths to follow; there was the traditional route, which I followed while I was an artillery officer and the alternative route, which had a variety of options, one of

them being a designated FAO. Foreign Area Officers serve in a variety of jobs at a senior level including Defence and Army Attachés, Political-Military advisors, Security Assistance and military cooperation officers, liaison officers between the United States and other nations. My chosen career path required me to be proficient as both a conventional artillery officer and as an FAO." Colonel O'Sullivan was initially posted to Germany for three years as a 2nd and 1st Lieutenant. He subsequently spent a number of years back in the USA in a variety of appointments and attending various career courses. However, he missed life in Germany in many respects. "Professionally, Germany was an excellent place to be in the late seventies and early eighties. Frankly, that's where the action was during the cold war. At that time up to 70% of conventional US field artillery was stationed in Europe, so there were area operational and deployment challenges." After assignments with the 9th Infantry and 10th Mountain Divisions, it was time for John to start his career as a FAO. His first posting required him to gain knowledge of the vicious Yugoslav civil war, which had erupted in the Balkans. "I was stationed at US European Command (USEUCOM



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Headquarters) in Stuttgart. I arrived there approximately ten days after the war started in Sarajevo. My portfolio was the Balkans and my role in Stuttgart required in-depth area familiarisation as well as operational and tactical knowledge. This meant developing plans, preparing briefings, traveling to the Balkans and essentially trying to understand the ground truth of what was going on in the region. So it was a big change, moving from a conventional tactical unit in the States to a theatre-level headquarters in Europe, working on a very complex problem at the operational and strategic level. We needed to understand what was going on, even though we had not committed troops yet. It involved a lot of analysis as to how we would work with United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the existing operational context or what we might be required to do after signing the Dayton Accord, marking the official end of the conflict and transition to the implementation of the accord and beginning of stability operations." After that, John was selected for Battalion command, which marked a return to the tactical level with a Field Artillery battalion at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. "I was in a unique

position; a dual world, where every other assignment would take me either into artillery or the work of a FAO." Col.O'Sullivan's next FAO assignment in 1996 took him right into the heart of the old Soviet Empire, stationed at the US Embassy in Moscow during the latter years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. "I worked as Chief of the Arms Control Implementation Unit in Moscow. It was quite a jump, with no extra language training, from artillery command in Oklahoma to an assignment in the Russian capital working on treaty implementation for a number of US-Russian arms Control agreements. These were two incredible and fascinating years, years of actual stability, prior to the economic chaos surrounding the devaluation of the Russian Ruble in 1998." John's transatlantic career took him then back across the water to the Army War College in Pennsylvania to study and from there my options led me back to Europe as the US Military Attaché for Finland and Estonia. "It was interesting as we were dealing with a neutral country, Finland, and a country with EU and NATO aspirations in Estonia at the same time. A very interesting and enjoyable period of time. I came to Ireland from there in summer 2002."



Colonel John O'Sullivan: "My job is to relate to your defence establishment."

Attaché Roles

So what is the work of a US military attaché in Dublin? "The attaché office in Ireland is designed specially to work within the Irish environment. Here I have responsibility for Defence attaché issues in relation to our entire military spectrum. I serve as a political-military advisor to our Ambassador. I also handle security assistance issues between Ireland and the US. For instance, if the Defence Forces wanted to undertake training in the US or purchase American equipment or indeed have existing equipment serviced, that's where I would be available to assist. The Javelin anti-armour system procurement is an example of this. Ireland was actually the first nation

outside the US to choose and field Javelin, ahead of many other nations. My job is to relate to your Defence establishment and to assist the Irish Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs as well as the Defence Forces." Another issue Colonel O'Sullivan deals with here is force protection. This is a particularly relevant issue in the current environment. Col. O'Sullivan would therefore organise the practicalities surrounding US naval visits and US military transit flights. "I have also formed many strong relationships and have very high regard for those in the Irish security apparatus, including the Gardai, the Defence Forces and the Departments of

Defence and Foreign Affairs." People may ask why the United States feels the need to have a military attaché in a neutral nation like Ireland. Colonel O'Sullivan says that his role here is part of US policy in relation to deploying military attachés. However, on a cultural level, he feels that Ireland and the US have such strong historical links and indeed soldiering traditions, that having a US military attaché here is a logical step. "With no language barrier, it would seem to make the job much easier," he adds. "If there is a problem you can deal with it straight away because linguistically and intellectually you're already there. We have a strong ethnic and political relationship and that's not going to go away." That



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said, what appears deceptively familiar from a distance can be quite different up close. "It was harder than I thought. Linguistically and culturally there were no major problems, but there are deeper facets to it then that. I came to understand that just because I have strong Irish-American roots that doesn't mean you will be able to get to grips automatically with how things are done here. It's not a foregone conclusion. For me personally, and professionally, it's a tremendously fulfilling and challenging assignment."

Perceptions of Irish Defence

Col. O'Sullivan is in a rather unique position of being essentially an observer of the sphere of Irish defence. In that case, what are his observations on the Irish Defence Forces and is it regarded internationally as a 'world-class' military organisation? "First and foremost I have a tremendous regard for the Irish Defence Forces. You have a superb organisation that is already world-class. In the Irish military there is competent leadership, vision and very good soldiers, and I mean that in a global sense. The Irish soldier is world class. One of my frustrations here is that I sometimes perceive a general sense of begrudgery and I would certainly like to see more people being proud of the impressive work the Defence Forces does. I would also stress my confidence in your leadership, as you have great General and senior officers, as well as a cadre of superb young and talented junior officers. You also have a strong Non-Commissioned Officer Corps. I think they have done things not just in Ireland, but much further afield, which reflect tremendously well on this country. For a relatively small military organisation you have troops deployed on a global level, in very important places and challenging, sensitive environments, who are conducting full spectrum operations at a consistently high operational tempo. I think the Irish deployment to Liberia, considering the time constraints, was carried out in an exemplary fashion." Col. O'Sullivan says that the fact that Liberia is a UN Chapter 7 (Peace Enforcement) mission is of no great consequence. "The Defence Forces have the capability to be deployed to chapter seven type missions, and they are doing it very well."

Observations

The Colonel has also made observations as to how the different roles our Defence Forces are charged with have helped shaped the strengths of the organisation. By

law and convention, the United States military is not concerned with all the roles of the Irish military. US forces are not as widely utilised as the Irish in domestic roles like Aid to the Civil Power (ATCP) missions. The US Army and National Guard does perform some Aid to the Civil authority (ATCA) missions, but usually in a much different context from the Irish. Colonel O'Sullivan believes that this adds a lot more clarity to an officer's role and that objectives can be clearer. However, during times of peace, the United States military have reappraised the roles that they undertake. "Consequently," says Col. O'Sullivan, "we find ourselves doing a far broader variety of work. This has meant that we have had to work very hard to bring ourselves up to speed with the sort of work that the Irish Defence Forces do so regularly. For instance, peacekeeping, which Irish soldiers have been involved in since the early sixties is something which we have been focusing on heavily and we have been learning lessons from Irish experiences overseas." United States military personnel have studied in the UN Training School at the Curragh in Ireland and that has been one of many vital steps in establishing the mindset required for peacekeeping duty, one long inculcated within the Irish Defence Forces. The often discussed 'triple-lock' system (UN mandate, Government agreement and Dail approval) which must be satisfied in order to deploy Irish troops has been seen by some as a hindrance to our participation in some missions, Macedonia in 2003 is one example. Col. O'Sullivan does not agree. "Every country has its own mechanism. We have that in the US. Contrary to popular belief, any domestic or overseas mission must be authorised by the national command authority and undertaken with full approval. There is civilian control of the military. In any democracy, a nation will set up rules and conventions with regard to roles, missions and troop deployment and the military will execute in accordance with those rules. The triple-lock is the system that Ireland has chosen. I think comparing and contrasting a EU mission to a UN mission to a NATO mission is a bit unfair. What's the difference between the Petersberg tasks being implemented in Macedonia or Bosnia or Liberia or the Sudan or anywhere else? There is no difference; military tasks are military tasks. When you tell a soldier to carry out a mission, you provide the soldier the rules of engagement and let leaders and soldiers execute the mission. I think the Irish Defence Forces do that very, very well."

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Challenges

While the Colonel's view of the Irish officer and Irish soldier both at home and overseas is overwhelmingly positive he is aware of the very tough decisions ahead in the Irish Defence sector. One of the most obvious being how much we spend on defence. "That's not for me to say of course. But the facts are that the percentage of GNP spent on defence is decreasing and that defence spending in this country is very low. While the financial numbers are low, the output is very high when you consider what the Defence Forces does. The value for money level is absolutely excellent. However, the world today since 9-11 is different. Today the threats are asymmetrical and efficiencies have to be found in all sectors, but finding efficiency goes only so far in proving for a credible defence. The basic fact is that it costs money to run a defence force, which is a fundamental requirement of establishing a sovereign nation. Recognising the roles and missions within a nation's defence structure is vital. In today's collective security environment, the question is: can you contribute and what specific contributions are best suited to the nation and the mission? I think it is here where Ireland needs to take pride in her achievements. With minimal defence spending, Ireland is making a valuable contributions here and today. The Irish Defence Forces punches way above their weight. The question that follows is of course, can it be maintained and at what point is the spending simply not adequate to provide for the defence needs of the nation?" Col.O'Sullivan is also impressed with how the leadership has rationally transformed itself in the changes of recent years. "They have found the right programmes, the right places and the right equipment." However Colonel O'Sullivan believes that ATPC roles are vital for both the nation and the organisation. "If you look at the huge successes in terms of ATPC, cash-in-transit, the foot-and-mouth operation and border patrols and checkpoints by way of example, these are tremendously important tasks."



The collapse of the Berlin Wall has led to a change in American military priorities in Europe.

Family Support

As a man with vast overseas experience, what does Colonel O'Sullivan see as the key considerations in the issue of support mechanisms for soldiers and their families when deployed overseas? "If you have a family, obviously that's your key concern. I'm sure you could ask my wife this question and she'd have something to say after the number of years we've spent overseas! In the US context, we've worked very hard on providing a good level of family support for our people in the field

and on deployment. I think communications are the single most important thing. It proves that the military recognises that families are important. When soldiers are preparing for a mission, families are also preparing for that mission; once deployed good communications is absolutely vital. Significant technology enhancements with email, digital photography and even video conferencing has meant massive improvements in this area. Any mission or deployment has two sides, what the soldier does and what the family does in their



An American peacekeeper at Srebrenica. The Balkans conflict of the nineties was one of Col. O'Sullivan's first FAO assignments.

absence. It's not just a case of providing communications. The military need to look at the nett cost of missions on soldiers and their families. There needs to be a programme of preparation for deployment, support during the mission and reintegration after the job is done. I don't think the military can ever do enough in this regard. It's not something you can do with an insurance scheme, it requires investment and support."

Battalion Structure

Does Colonel O'Sullivan believe that maintaining the capability of deploying a battalion on overseas peacekeeping or peace-enforcing missions is vital for the practical maintenance of these skills for the Irish Defence Forces? "These are tough decisions to make and I will support whatever the Defence Forces decides to do. However, the battalion structure seems to make sense to me. That said, remember that in today's tough security environment there is a broad spectrum of responsibilities and no one nation's military can do everything themselves. There is also the fact that various nations' militaries do certain things better than others. In this context, in terms of peacekeeping for example, the Irish Defence Forces do these sorts of roles better than almost any other country. As I said though, the battalion structure does make sense because the

battalion is the basic military unit of operations for ground forces. The basic unit for the conduct ground operations, be they UN Chapter 6, UN Chapter 7 or combat, is a battalion or in US terminology a Battalion Task Force."

European Defence

The notions of niche capabilities and a multi national approach have been two of the common phrases often used when discussing the growth of an integrated European defence structure. While such a format may work, Colonel O'Sullivan recommends caution. "I think you have to be careful. Nations need to remember what the basic mission of their military organisations is. The basic responsibility is to deter and defend the sovereignty of the nation. That's the bottom line. Every nation feels the same way and every nation needs to have a capability to do that. That's where so-called 'plug-in' military developments can potentially be difficult."

Currently, the United States is in the process of reconfiguring its military relationship with Europe. 70,000 American troops are due to be relocated to the continental United States. How does the Colonel feel that this will effect transatlantic relations, the NATO construct and a culture which has been going for many decades? "I think the effect this will

have is overstated. We have to look at the big picture and understand why it's happening. Most of the US troops in Europe were there for a reason, to help offset a threat from the Soviet Union. Times have changed and that phase of our lives has passed. US forces in Europe had traditionally been focused on Western Europe, although the US European command retained significant responsibilities for Africa and Eastern Europe. Militaries all around the world have been radically downsized. The United States military now has other challenges and the traditional role of combat on the central plains of Europe no longer applies. US Forces in Europe still make sense, but now those forces will be postured to deploy to other global hotspots instead of remaining on the European continent. I've lived a sizeable part of my life in Europe, as a child and during my professional career and I've seen how things have changed. We now have to do what makes sense for the US. It's not just the global security environment that has changed but also the US military, which has changed. Today's US military capabilities and leadership make it a very challenging and proud time to be an officer. It's a different force which is transforming to meet a different set of challenges. That said there will still be a very substantial US military relationship with Europe."