

A PICTORIAL HISTORY  
OF  
ÓGLAIGH NA HÉIREANN,  
THE DEFENCE FORCES OF IRELAND

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Chief of Staff, The Defence Forces  
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*Editor's Note*

This booklet traces the history of the Defence Forces from its foundation in 1913 to the present day. I hope that you find the information presented both interesting and helpful. The booklet does not pretend to answer all your questions but it should provide you with a better understanding of the organisation of which you are now a member. In particular it should encourage you to read further on the subject so that you can develop an informed insight into the origins of both the Defence Forces and of the country it serves so proudly and selflessly. My thanks are due especially to the staffs of Public Relations Section, Military Archives and the Defence Forces Printing Press whose knowledge, expertise and willing help made my task that much easier.

Commandant  
Editor



*Foreword by the Chief of Staff The Defence Forces*

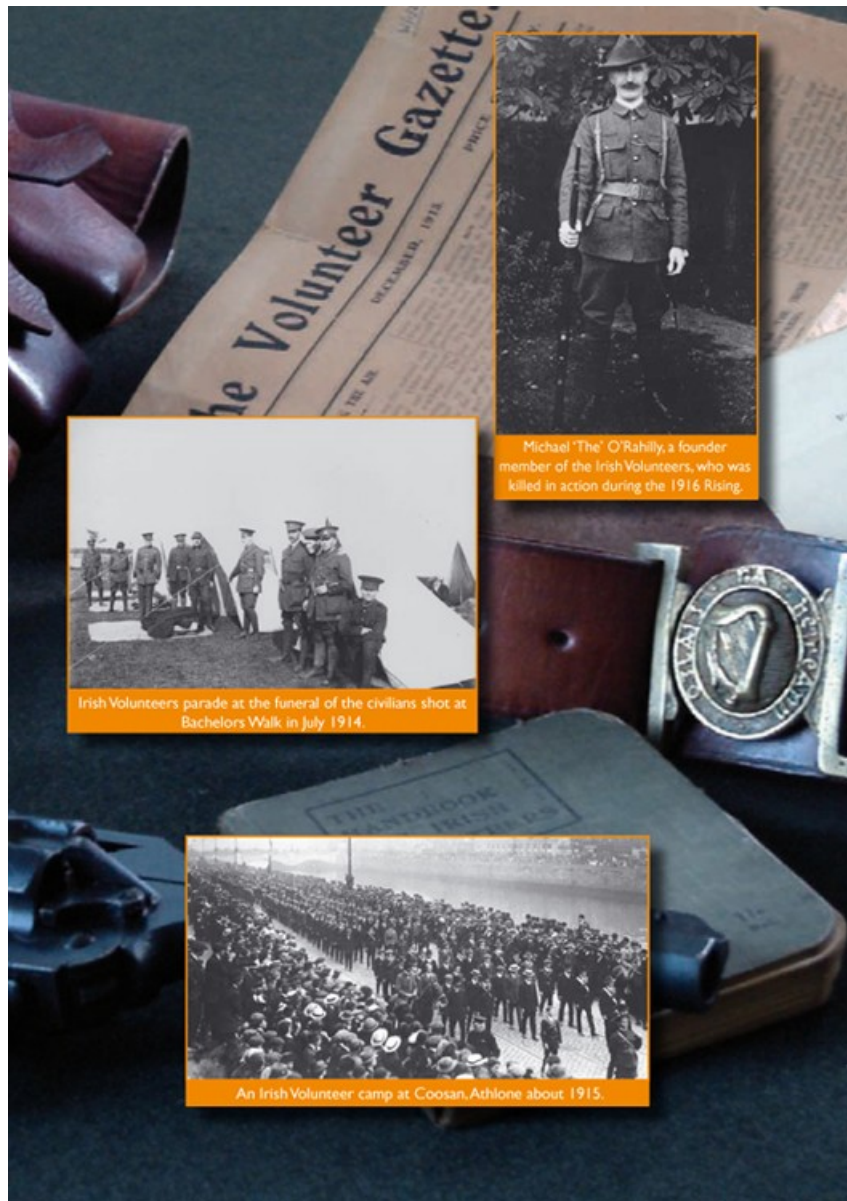
I am pleased to introduce this very brief history of our Defence Forces which I hope you as a member will find both interesting and useful. History is the basis of our traditions and the pride we feel in our Defence Forces. It follows therefore that without a knowledge of our history we are in danger of losing a sense of the values and ethos that are an essential part of our identity.

This booklet aims to provide you with an understanding of the organisation that you have become a part. The tradition of service and loyalty, that runs as a theme throughout our history, was set by the Volunteers in 1913 and is continued to this day in the modern Defence Forces. I urge all the young men and women who have recently embarked on a career in either the Permanent Defence Force or the Reserve Defence Force to develop an interest in the foundation and development of the organisation they have recently joined. Our history is in essence a history of this state.

I wish to thank Comdt Billy Campbell who took on the editorial work for this project at my request. I hope you will find the finished product informative and stimulating and that it will help to instil a greater sense of pride in who we are and in what we do.

*J Sreenan*

Maj Gen Jim Sreenan  
Chief of Staff  
The Defence Forces



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### *1913 Foundation of the Volunteers*

The Irish Volunteers, Óglaigh na hÉireann, were founded on 25 November 1913 at a public meeting held in the Rotunda Rink in Dublin. The founders included The O'Rahilly, a member of the governing body of the Gaelic League, Eoin Mac Néill, Professor of Early and Mediaeval Irish History at University College Dublin, and Patrick Pearse, another prominent member of the Gaelic League.

The movement caught the public imagination so that by July 1914 the Volunteers numbered some 180,000 members. The Volunteers were formed against a background of rising militancy in Ireland. The spur for this was the Irish Home Rule Bill of 1912 to which the Unionists were vehemently opposed.

As a result of Unionist opposition to Home Rule, the Ulster Volunteer Force was created and by 1913 had been organised into a force of nearly 100,000 men. Inspired by the example of Ulster, the Irish Volunteers were founded.

**A Volunteer under armed escort after the Rising.**

**PUBLACHT NA H ÉIREANN.  
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT  
OF THE  
IRISH REPUBLIC  
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.**

**DESIRE AND DETERMINATION:** In the name of God and of the dead generations from which the nation has still tradition of nobility, Ireland, through us, renounce her children in her flag and writes her fate.

Having organized and trained her members through her secret, revolutionary organisations, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently endured her discipline, having repeatedly waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her social children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she arises in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the exclusive control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The very conception of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty: the times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and upon something it is owed to the free of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of the freedom of its workers, and of its exiles among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and ignoring of the differences which have divided by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

But our arms have brought the separation moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God. Whosoever shall desert or oppose our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will desert or oppose it by cowardice, treachery, or rapine. In this momentous hour the Irish nation must, by its valor and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on behalf of the Provisional Government,  
THOMAS J. CLARKE,  
SEAN HAR DEARADA, THOMAS MACKENZIE,  
P. H. TOLAN, KATHIE CRUICKSHANK,  
JAMES CONNOLLY, JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

**Padraig Pearse, President of the Republic and Commander in Chief of its army during the 1916 Rising, who was executed on 3 May 1916.**



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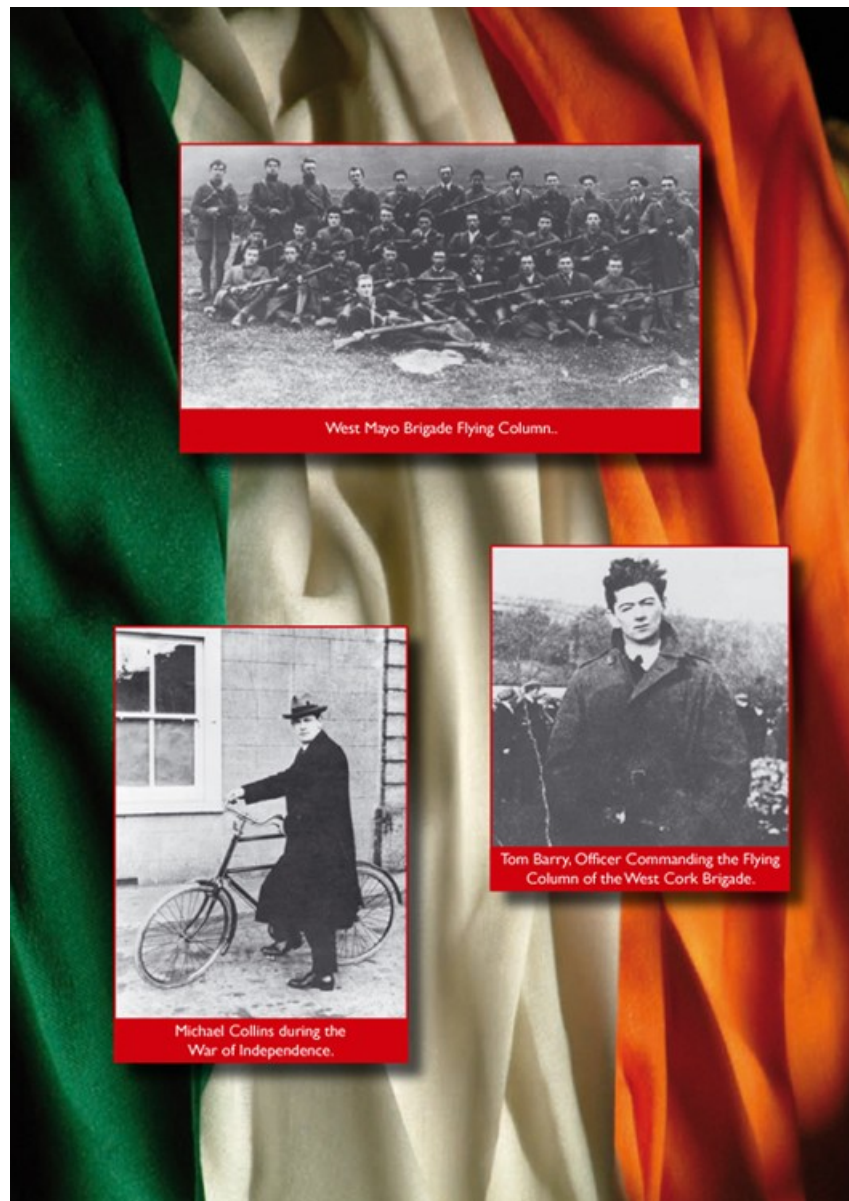
### 1916 Easter Rising

The Irish Volunteers had a membership of 180,000 by mid-1914 but split over whether its members should enlist in the British Forces and fight in the European war. About 11,000 strongly opposed this and kept the original name. The remainder became known as the National Volunteers. The Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret revolutionary body, effectively took over control of the Irish Volunteers and using it, planned and directed a rebellion in 1916.



The Rising was virtually confined to Dublin. On Easter Monday the Volunteers occupied a number of strategic buildings within the city that commanded the main routes into the capital. As the week progressed fighting became intense and was characterised by prolonged, fiercely contested street battles.

On Saturday the insurgent leaders, based mainly in the General Post Office, were forced to agree to a surrender. Their decision was then made known to and accepted, sometimes reluctantly, by the garrisons still fighting. The Irish Volunteers had fought with discipline and skill. Fifteen of the leaders of the Rising were executed between 3 and 12 May 1916.



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## *1919/1921 War of Independence*

The War of Independence was initiated in January 1919 by a number of young, determined Volunteer leaders. They were convinced that a republic could only be gained by force. By necessity, they adopted a guerrilla campaign. They were organised initially into small independent units which launched frequent low-level surprise attacks.

Michael Collins played a pivotal role. He provided the Volunteers with funds, arms and equipment. His most critical contribution lay in the provision of intelligence. However, given the nature of guerrilla warfare, it was the individual Volunteer units who made the greatest contribution.

During the war 15,000 Volunteers were actively involved, with around 3,000 in service at any given time. From the autumn of 1919 the force had sufficient strength to attempt more spectacular actions and now became known as the Irish Republican Army. The best known of these took place on 21 November 1919, 'Bloody Sunday', during which 19 suspected British Army intelligence officers were shot.

By late 1920 the force had been organised into 'flying columns' – mobile units of about 100 men, based in remote camps or safe houses. By the middle of 1921 the British government became amenable to a political settlement and on 21 July a truce came into operation.



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### *1922/1923 Civil War*

The Anglo-Irish Treaty, negotiated during the truce and signed on 6 December 1921, caused deep divisions within nationalist Ireland. Those who favoured acceptance argued that the powers it granted made it worthy of support and the only alternative was renewed war with Britain. The Treaty's opponents criticised it most for its failure to achieve the status of a republic for Ireland.

Debates in the Dáil on the Treaty became bitter and personal. The Anti-Treaty IRA seized



barracks and public buildings as British civil servants and troops departed. Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson was shot in London on 22 June 1922 and as a result the British Government insisted that the Irish Government take action against the Anti-Treaty IRA or it would consider the Treaty to have been broken.

On 28 June 1922 the National Army, as the Pro-Treaty IRA now become known, bombarded the Four Courts in Dublin which was occupied by the Anti-Treaty forces leadership. The Civil War had begun. After a period of conventional warfare the Anti-Treaty side reverted to a guerrilla campaign. This was accompanied by assassinations and the destruction of buildings, bridges and other installations. The Provisional Government adopted special powers and executed 77 prisoners before the opponents of the Treaty called a cease-fire on 24 May 1923. As many as 4,000 were killed during the Civil War.



The Mounted Escort, popularly known as the Blue Hussars, parade for the first time in public during the Eucharistic Congress of 1932

Members of the Volunteer Force, founded in 1934, parade through Dublin



### *1923/1939 Between the Wars*

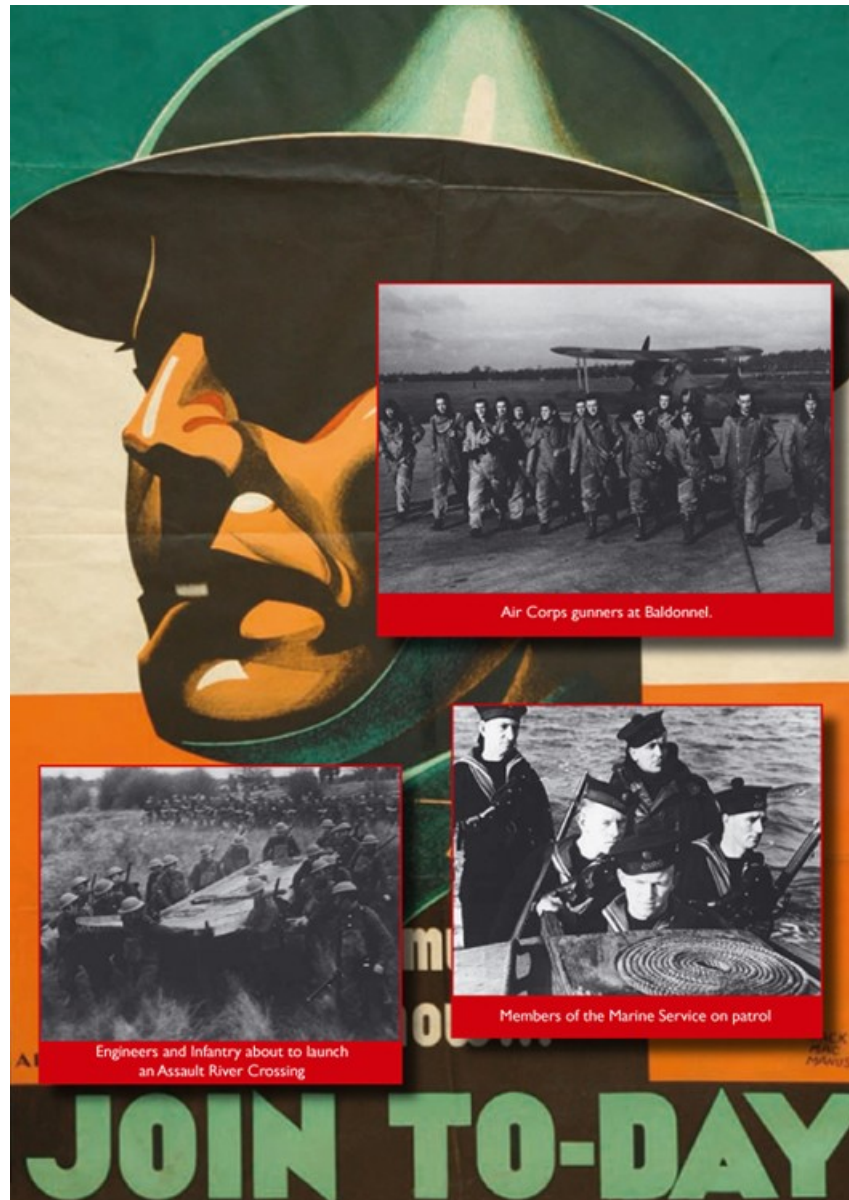
In the autumn of 1923 it was decided to reduce the strength of the army and to reorganise it for peacetime. This entailed a reduction of 30,000 personnel. A small group of officers, led mainly by former members of Collins' intelligence unit, attempted to resist the efforts to demobilise officers. This evolved into what has been called the "Army Mutiny" of March 1924. Its importance is not in what actually happened but that when it was resolved the supremacy of democratic control was established over the Defence Forces.

At the end of the Civil War the new state set about providing a legal status for its armed forces. Under the Defence Forces (Temporary Provisions) Act, 1923 the Executive Council formally established Óglaigh na hÉireann on 1 October 1924.

A Military Mission was sent to the USA in 1926 to study organisation and training methods. As a result training was placed on a proper footing with the establishment of a Military College, Corps and Service Schools.

The Eucharistic Congress, held in Dublin in 1932, saw a heavy ceremonial and administrative commitment by the Defence Forces. The Mounted Escort (popularly known as the Blue Hussars) first appeared in public at the Congress.

As the Permanent Defence Force was being reduced, a policy of building up Reserves was pursued which culminated with the formation of the Volunteer Force in 1934.



### *1939/1946 The Emergency*

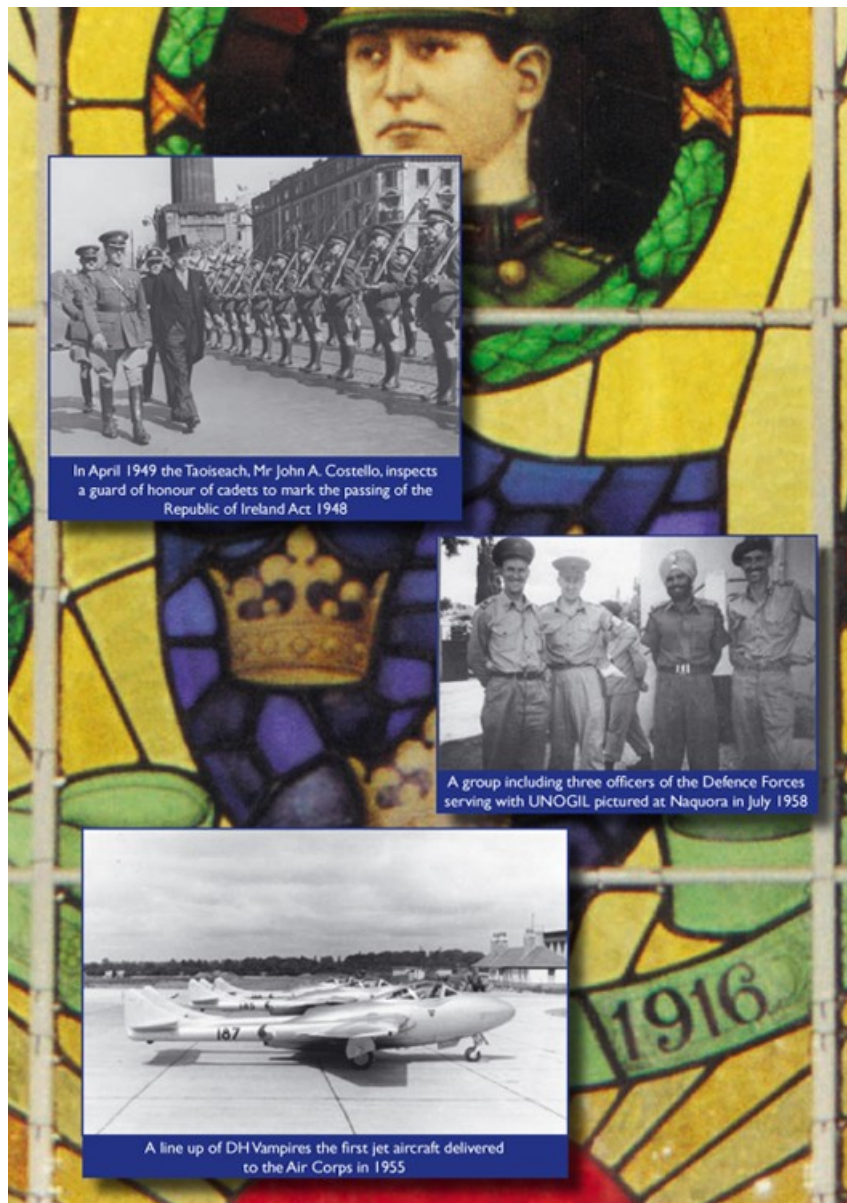
On the outbreak of World War II, in September 1939, the Defence Forces mobilised at a strength of less than 20,000. A recruiting campaign began and an effective fighting force was quickly developed. In April/May 1941 the strength of the Emergency Army reached a high point of almost 41,000 and in June 1943 the Local Defence Force reached a strength of 106,000.

Mobilisation saw the formation of two divisions and two independent brigades. The First

Division, under Maj Gen M. J. Costello, had its headquarters in Cork while the Second Division, under Maj Gen Hugo McNeill, had its headquarters in Carton House, Maynooth.

The independent 5 and 8 Brigades were based in the Curragh and in Rineanna (now Shannon Airport) respectively. The area based Commands relinquished responsibility for field operations but continued to undertake all garrison duties, recruit training and the organisation of the Local Defence Force.

Approximately 170 aircraft crashed or force landed on Irish territory during the period. Separate internment camps were established in the Curragh for both Allied and German aircrews as well as the 164 German seamen rescued by the MV Kerlogue in the Bay of Biscay. In addition to the bombing of the North Strand in Dublin, bombs were also dropped in Campile, Dundalk, Monaghan, Carlow and the Curragh.







### *1946/1960 Post Emergency Years*

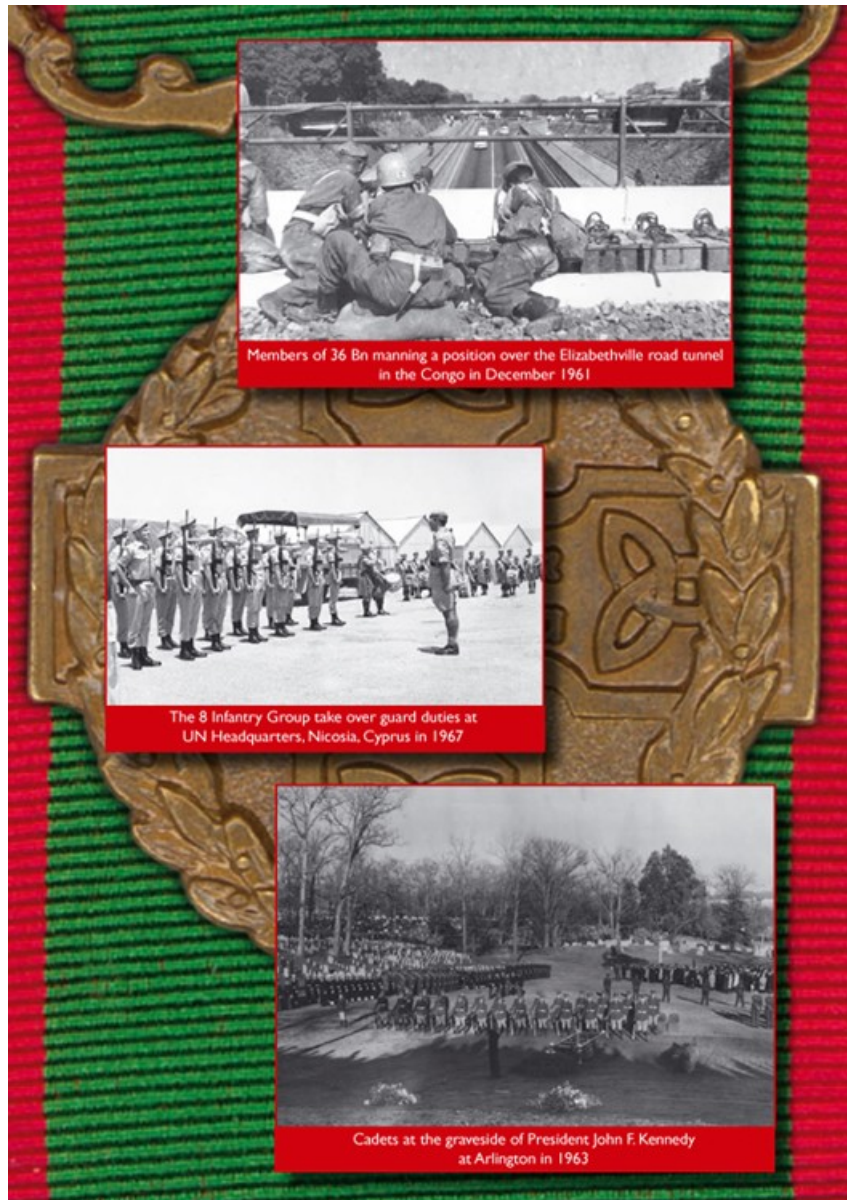
At the end of the Emergency the strength of the Defence Forces was reduced to an establishment of 12,500. The Regular Army was now composed of three Brigades, one in each Command. By March 1947 strength had dropped to 8,803.

To capitalise on the Emergency experience An Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil (FCÁ) replaced the Local Defence Force. The declaration of a Republic in April 1949 saw no change however to the government's defence policy. Poor conditions and lack of equipment led to a period of stagnation that remained until the onset of overseas service.

In December 1956 the IRA Border Campaign got underway and concentrated on attacks on British Army barracks and RUC stations. In response elements of the Defence Forces were moved to the border. By March 1962 the campaign had ended. In 1959 the FCÁ was integrated with the Regular Army. Six Brigades of mixed Regular and FCÁ units, each with only one Regular Infantry Battalion were established.

Ireland became a member of the United Nations in 1955 and in 1958 sent military observers on a UN mission to the Middle East (UNOGIL). This was the beginning of the Defence Forces' involvement in overseas service, which continues to this day.





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*1960/1969 The Sixties*

The United Nations mission in the Congo, which lasted from July 1960 to May 1964, opened up new horizons for the Defence Forces. Overseas service highlighted many shortcomings. As a result pay and conditions improved and equipment was modernised. The 7.62mm FN rifle replaced the .303 Lee-Enfield, Panhard armoured cars replaced the Swedish Landverks and Irish-built Fords. Overseas service also came at a price at places such as Niemba where nine soldiers

died on 11 November 1960.

Cyprus was the next area of operations. In April 1964 the first Irish unit was sent there to keep the peace between the Turkish and Greek communities. It turned out to be our longest overseas mission by far and participation lasted until May 2005.

In June 1963 the President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, visited Ireland. During his visit he laid a wreath on the graves of the 1916 leaders at Arbour Hill. He declared afterwards that this had been one of the most impressive experiences of his life. Before the year was out our Cadets rendered military honours at his graveside in Arlington following his assassination.

In 1966 the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising was commemorated in military ceremonies involving all elements of the Defence Forces.





### *1969/Present Into the Modern Era*

In 1969 the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland marked the start of an intense period of Aid to the Civil Power (ATCP) by all elements of the Defence Forces. The FCA played a very important part in this task. The emphasis was now placed on internal security operations rather than conventional operations.

Three Infantry Groups were initially deployed to the border with the six counties. The establishment of field hospitals and refugee camps added a new dimension to a very complex operation. As a result three newly activated Infantry Battalions and a Cavalry Squadron were established and ten military posts were developed in the border area. In 1980 the integrated brigade system was replaced by a separate command and control structure for FCA units within each Command.

The tasks for the Defence Forces included the provision of permanent guards on vital installations, the provision of armed parties for the escort of cash, explosives and prisoners, and the presence at blasting within the state. In addition specialist assistance such as bomb disposal, search teams as well as air and naval support were provided to the Gardaí. The increased security requirements for events such as high profile visits and EU Summits added to the commitment.

In May 1991 the Minister for Defence signed the Defence Forces' Regulation which resulted in the establishment of representative associations.





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### *The Modern Era*

The late 1990s heralded a new phase in the evolution of the Defence Forces with a major restructuring involving the removal of Command Headquarters, the disestablishment of garrison units, the closure of barracks and the development of a three brigade structure. Funds freed up from the reduction in personnel and the sale of property were put into a re-equipment and infrastructural programme. The period saw an increased emphasis on planning, education and

training. A range of human resource policy initiatives were introduced which serve to cement a commitment to best HR practice. The Defence Forces has embraced the need for these ongoing changes as part of its culture.

As a result of multi-role tasking by the government the Naval Service, assisted by the Air Corps, now has considerable responsibilities in monitoring and conducting surveillance of Ireland's maritime interests.

The period saw a restructuring of the Reserve Defence Force which involved major organisational change with access to improved training resources, new equipment and logistic support.

The Peace Process, heralded by the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on April 10, 1998, has reduced the intensity of the commitment to Aid to the Civil Power Operations and has allowed greater emphasis on training for the full spectrum of Peace Support Operations. Ongoing world tension and the international response to natural disasters indicate that multinational peace support, crisis management and humanitarian operations will play an increasing part in the activities of the Defence Forces.





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### *Peace Support Operations*

The involvement by the Defence Forces in Peace Support Operations has been continuous since June 1958 when the first group of Officers went to Lebanon as observers with UNOGIL. The majority of these missions have arisen in recent years and reflect the increased demand for intervention in areas of conflict. The bulk of the tours of duty have been completed by infantry units in major force missions deployed in the Congo, Cyprus and Lebanon and latterly in Liberia

and Kosovo. Other commitments have included headquarters and specialist elements, logistical units, military police units and military observers.

As well as with the United Nations, the Defence Forces have served with missions conducted by the European Union, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and NATO-Partnership for Peace. Personnel have also been committed to humanitarian work in places such as Somalia and Rwanda.

The Defence Forces have amassed a wide range of skills and experience in Peace Support Operations and wish to remain abreast of developments. To do so the United Nations Training School was established in 1993 and conducts courses for all missions abroad and for students from other armed forces.

We are particularly mindful of the comrades who have lost their lives while on duty abroad in the service of peace.



DEFENCE FORCES' BADGE

The Badge design (common to all Corps and Services and all orders of dress) is derived from the badge of the Irish Volunteers and was designed by Professor Eoin MacNeill, Chairman of the National Executive of the Irish Volunteers. This badge was originally adopted by the Irish Volunteers in October 1914 as the official badge of the organisation. The Centrepiece is formed of the letters 'FF'. These letters signify 'Fianna Fáil'. The word 'Fianna' is the name of the ancient military organisation (circa 3rd Century A.D.) forming what then corresponded to the standing Army of the country. The word 'Fáil' means 'Destiny'. One of the ancient names of Ireland was 'Inishfáil' (the Isle of Destiny) and 'Fianna Fáil' thus signifies the 'Fianna (or Army) of Ireland'. The two letters are surrounded by a representation of an ancient warriors sword belt and a circle of flames which represent the 'Sunburst' – the traditional battle symbol of the Fianna. The words 'Óglaigh na h-Éireann' inscribed around the sword belt mean 'Soldiers of Ireland'. No particular significance is attached to the representation of the star which was included to balance the design.

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[www.defenceforces.ie](http://www.defenceforces.ie)  
[www.militaryarchives.ie](http://www.militaryarchives.ie)