



Reserve Defence Forces Representative Association

Comhlachas Ionadaitheach na nÓglach Cúltaca

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RDFRA Opening Statement

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During RDFRA's last appearance in November 2015 before the then-Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality, we spoke about various issues facing the Reserve Defence Forces at the time. The Association was keen to work openly, supportively and closely with the Military Authorities and the Department of Defence towards the resolution of all issues. At the time, the 2015 White Paper on Defence had just been published. It was RDFRA's intention to fully support the implementation of this document, and so we actively endorsed and promoted the White Paper to our members. All in all, we expected 2016 to be a positive and growth-filled year for the Reserve. Sadly, the result was exactly the opposite.

In terms of recruitment – generally the main concern on the lips of every reservist – there were 351 new recruits who joined organisation in 2015, a welcome increase of 194 on the previous year's figure of 157. However, by the end of October 2016, only 47 recruits had been trained by the Reserve since the start of the year. The Military Authorities hoped that the figure might reach between 80 and 100 by the end of the year; it ended up being somewhere in the region of 60.

Recruitment is the life blood of the Reserve, and without a steady flow of new recruits, the organisation is doomed to erode away to nothing. During our November 2015 opening address to the Joint Committee, I personally stated that "This year, recruitment competitions yielded an increase of just over 300 new members, but retirements due to natural wastage resulted in a loss of over 200 other personnel. Overall, this produced a net gain of approximately 100 new members. If this rate of increase were to continue year on year into the future, it will be 2030 before the Reserve will have recruited up to its establishment." Within weeks of saying this, we could have revised this statement to point out that retirements were now outstripping recruitment. While the Reserve had 2,280 effective members at the end of 2015, it had reduced to 2,064 by the end of 2016.

Most tellingly, application figures actually increased from 2014 on. In 2014, the Reserve received 4,870 applications to join, while between September 2015 and December 2016 (a period during which there was an administrative pause on Reserve recruitment for several months to allow for a Permanent Defence Forces recruitment competition) the Reserve received 5,891 applications to join. Somehow, while the 4,870 applications received in 2014 resulted in 351 new recruits in 2015, the 5,891 applications from the next round of recruiting resulted in approximately only 60 recruits. For some reason in 2016, the ability of the Defence Forces to induct new reservists plummeted.

The problem partially stems from the overburdening of Permanent Defence Forces staff in various offices that deal with recruitment. These offices, staffed by a handful of personnel at

best, are responsible for Permanent and Reserve recruitment, along with a host of other tasks. Anything to do with the Reserve is often given the lowest priority, meaning that vital Reserve administration is often attended to only months after a due date, resulting in endless delays that see some Reserve applicants waiting over eighteen months to undergo the required tests to join the Reserve. The other half of the problem is the unwillingness of some Permanent Defence Forces personnel to support Reserve recruitment endeavours. So while many are genuinely seeking to do their jobs and support the Reserve but are completely snowed under, others simply view the Reserve as not a real part of the Defence Forces, and so therefore not really important in the grand scheme of things. It must be added that, when members of the Permanent Defence Forces act in such a way towards the Reserve, they rarely – if ever – are reprimanded by higher military authority. In essence, an insidious culture of discrimination is allowed to go unchecked.

Either way, the negative handling of Reserve recruitment has the same effect; the goodwill and enthusiasm of many Reserve applicants is utterly destroyed, producing in them a lasting and unfairly negative opinion of the Reserve, while the Reserve itself gets smaller and smaller, despite the thousands of young Irish men and women looking to join each year.

Based on current trends, RDFRA's previous prediction that the Reserve would not recruit up to establishment strength until 2030 has proved to be grossly optimistic. Now, if the net loss of 200 members that the Reserve experienced this year continues on into the future, the Reserve will cease to exist by 2026, with it likely being seen as impractical to sustain long before that. We would like to strongly re-emphasise that this is not due to a lack of interest from people looking to join and improve both themselves and their communities via Reserve military service to the State, but rather it is due to the lack of importance with which the Reserve is viewed by elements within the Defence Forces and Department of Defence.

Sadly, recruitment is not the only area in which the Reserve is mishandled and mistreated. RDFRA have been fighting the case for improvements to the personal protective equipment – also known as PPE – supplied to the Reserve for years. Unlike with members of the Permanent Defence Forces, reservists do not obtain a personal issue of many items of PPE. Instead, Reserve units pool this equipment for use by various individuals when required. With regards to other items of PPE – most notable cold weather clothing – reservists do not receive any meaningful items of this type at all. In terms of the pooled items, this equipment is regularly returned to storerooms in a heavily soiled state, only to be stored in this condition for weeks or months before being handed out to a different reservist in the future. I invite the committee to imagine what a mould-covered sweat-soaked helmet or mud-and-sheep-faeces covered wetsuit looks like when it is removed from a warm storeroom after several months of storage. Furthermore, we wish to point out that the reservists who assisted with flood relief efforts around the country during the winter of 2015/16 did so almost exclusively with items of warm clothing that they had purchased themselves, because the Defence Forces does not issue them with any such clothing beyond a thin Norwegian top that is hardly sufficient for minus temperatures.

In order to combat this health-and-safety-disaster-waiting-to-happen in relation to the pooled equipment, RDFRA had several meetings with senior military management, and it

was agreed that regulations on the correct cleaning of pooled PPE would be drafted and widely circulated to Defence Forces logistics personnel. Despite receiving multiple assurances that this would be done, logistics personnel in storerooms around the country are still unaware of this directive.

In contrast, when an issue arose over whether Reserve officers would be permitted to continue wearing a peaked cap with their dress uniform – an item of clothing normally worn by Permanent officers only – the relevant regulations were speedily amended to prohibit the wearing of this item of clothing by Reserve officers, and this instruction was widely and effectively circulated to ensure compliance. This example only proves that certain echelons of the Defence Forces care less about the correct provision of PPE for reservists, and more about trivialities such as making sure that Reserve officers cannot be mistaken for Permanent officers when wearing their dress uniforms. This example also proves that the mechanisms to make changes clearly exist, but are not being utilised for the benefit of reservists.

Similarly, RDFRA have continually requested that necessary amendments be made to other Defence Forces regulations governing the Reserve – most notably R5 and S7 – only to be informed month after month and year after year, that these regulations are still currently in the process of being examined. However, as the peaked cap issue shows, it seems that when there's a will for Reserve regulatory reform, it can happen very quickly.

Back in 2015, RDFRA argued that the end-of-year gratuity – taken from members following the 2012 Value For Money report – should be reintroduced, both to incentivise new members to join, and also to help offset the often substantial costs incurred by members during their annual service. It should be remembered that reservists undertake their duties in a predominantly voluntary unpaid capacity, and due to past barracks closures, they now have to travel considerable distances to reach their training centres. A returned gratuity would at least make serving in the Reserve more cost neutral than it currently is.

However, now we find ourselves faced with an extremely blasé attitude emanating from the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence towards normal Reserve pay, i.e. the pay that reservists receive for undertaking short blocks of fulltime training each year. One of the most frequent issues raised by reservists with RDFRA pertains to late payments. One of the Defence Forces' own internal documents – Army Financial Circular 297 – states that a reservist must be paid on the Friday of the week in which they have undertaken paid fulltime training. Despite this clear instruction, reservists frequently only receive their pay after a number of weeks delay; sometimes the delay is one of several months duration. In early 2017, RDFRA even dealt with one case where a member was still awaiting pay dating back to December 2015. Whenever these issues are raised by RDFRA, the response is generally that maladministration in the reservist's unit is the cause, as if explaining the cause of the problem is somehow the same as fixing it.

Put simply, when reservists receive pay, it is regularly treated as though it were an income supplement or a bonus of some sort, i.e. monies that a reservist is receiving on top of their civilian wage, and therefore monies that they do not really require as a matter of urgency. This is an outrageous and inaccurate view. In fact, many reservists take unpaid leave from

work to attend periods of Reserve fulltime training, and so their Reserve pay is actually an income replacement for that period, not a supplement. Furthermore, there have been tragic cases of reservists in receipt of social welfare payments who have signed off from their welfare payments in order to undertake paid periods of Reserve fulltime training, only to be told in the middle of the training week that the paperwork to pay them has not been processed, and so they will receive their Reserve pay at some undefined time in the future. Subsequently, their attendance at that period of Reserve fulltime training does not carry with it a social contribution – as they received neither a welfare payment nor Reserve pay during that week – but worst of all, thanks to their decision to undertake military service to the State for that period, they are left without any source of income for that period. This was the situation that several reservists found themselves in in the weeks preceding Christmas last year. Furthermore, if late payments are finally paid to a reservist in a subsequent calendar year, this adversely impacts their annual tax credits.

But no matter how often these concerns are raised, there seems to be either an inability or an unwillingness to seriously address and remedy the problems. I invite the committee to imagine what might happen in any government department or private sector business if employees were informed that their pay each week would arrive at some point in the future, but no one could say when for sure. We have no recourse to the Industrial Relations mechanisms of the State – the Workplace Relations Commission – to formally address this issue, and without official reprimand or rebuke, there is little prospect of any meaningful changes or improvements to this issue.

Ultimately, RDFRA believes that the constant river of obstacles faced by the Reserve stems from a culture within the Department of Defence and elements within the Military Authorities who simply could not care less about the Reserve Defence Forces. This has been allowed to flourish, unchecked by your or the public's scrutiny.

In terms of the Department of Defence, its level of engagement with RDFRA – and particularly in relation to the implementation of the 2015 White Paper on Defence – has been deeply troubling. RDFRA and the Reserve are considered only as an afterthought. RDFRA delegations have arrived at White Paper Joint Implementation Team briefings to be provided with documents that had been circulated amongst other key stakeholders well in advance of the meeting, but which RDFRA had not received. Queries raised and requests made by RDFRA go unanswered, while all attempts by RDFRA to engage further in the White Paper implementation process are rejected or ignored.

For example, when questioned about the number of reservists sitting on the twelve Reserve-relevant projects arising from the White Paper, a member of the White Paper Joint Implementation Team had to think hard about how many reservists were actually sitting on these project teams. They knew of one, possibly two. It is hard to imagine that key stakeholders would not be centrally and widely involved in the various White Paper project teams, but when it comes to the twelve projects linked to the Reserve, there are only two reservists permitted to be involved. RDFRA have continually recommended known subject matter experts within the Reserve – one of whom has conducted considerable academic research on the Reserve – to the Department of Defence in the hopes that these experts will be utilised as part of the White Paper project teams. Again, all recommendations made by

RDFRA have been ignored. This leads us to the inevitable conclusion that the Department of Defence has an agenda and desired outcome for the Reserve, and neither RDFRA nor any qualified reservists will have the opportunity to influence that goal in any way. To be blunt, the effect of this latent policy is to run the remains of the Reserve into the ground for their own reasons, reasons which we believe run counter to the stated policy of this and previous governments.

In relation to the level of engagement experienced by RDFRA from the Military Authorities, this is overall somewhat more positive. Most issues arise from individuals who are not adhering to Defence Forces policy, or from specific offices when Reserve matters fall through the cracks – either on purpose or due to overburdened staff. Meanwhile, on the whole, the general staff are positively disposed towards the Reserve.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said to be true with the Naval Service Reserve. Once, the Naval Service Reserve was the shining light of the Reserve; at points in the recent past Naval Service vessels would not have been able to put to sea if it were not for members of the Naval Service Reserve going aboard as extra crew when needed. Now, the Naval Service Reserve is the basket case of the Reserve. The command element of the Naval Service responsible for the Reserve engages with them in what can only be described as an erratic, highly questionable manner. Recruitment, training, and the provision of necessary supports are areas of extreme concern. In terms of recruitment, the current batch of Naval Service Reserve applicants have recently been asked to complete Garda security vetting applications for the third time. They were first asked to complete this in January 2016, then again in June/July 2016, and now they have been asked to do so for a third time. These are applicants who applied to join the Naval Service Reserve in late 2015, and who still have not been inducted into the organisation. It would not be hard to reverse the situation in the Naval Service Reserve, given the high level of expertise and qualifications present within the Reserve members of the organisation, but if Naval Service management does not wish to repair and grow the Naval Service Reserve, then its fate is sealed.

Sadly, the RDFRA must also report that – even at the highest levels – meaningful engagement is lacking. Since the start of July 2016, RDFRA have forwarded nine letters on matters of critical importance to the office of the Minister with responsibility for Defence. Aside from an acknowledgement of receipt reply received by RDFRA in each instance, no letters of reply have been received to any of these communications.

To sum up, the Reserve is a vital asset at the State's disposal. It is comprised of hardworking, enthusiastic and patriotic volunteers who undertake their Reserve duties in a predominantly unpaid capacity. Crucially, this makes the Reserve a very inexpensive force to maintain. To put it in context, the 2014 Reserve pay bill equated to only 75% of the annual cost of private cleaners to clean Defence Forces buildings that year, while the 2015 Reserve pay bill almost matched the Defence Forces 2015 natural gas bill. You would be very hard pressed to find an organisation who would not be excited at the prospect of having 4,000 willing and enthusiastic volunteers who will predominantly work for free in their service.

But the Reserve is not just a collection of patriotic Irish men and women. We are doctors, engineers, IT experts, legal professionals, academics, entrepreneurs, business owners,

tradespersons, civil servants, students; in essence, we come from all walks of life and provide the Defence Forces with a huge range of specialist skills. In fact, in 2016, six reservists – all with highly impressive IT backgrounds – revolutionised the communications systems that the Defence Forces were due to provide to the EU Battlegroup then training in Germany. All that was required for the Defence Forces to be impressive on the international stage was for these six reservists to travel to Germany for a number of days to setup their equipment after transit, after which the Permanent Defence Forces element of the Battlegroup could operate the equipment and the reservists could travel home. However, because of legislation that states that only members of the Permanent Defence Forces can serve overseas in operational roles, these reservists were prohibited from travelling to Germany, and the Defence Forces was subsequently unable to deploy the equipment that they had developed. This ban on letting reservists travel overseas – no matter how briefly – even extended to a group of reservists who were invited to view British Army Reserve training procedures in Ballykinler, Co. Down in 2016. The invitation had to be rejected after the Department of Defence deemed this to be operational service overseas. Arguments that there is no sea between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland fell on deaf ears. We see no benefit to the continued existence of this policy, as it hampers the Defence Forces in the delivery of its operational targets.

It is perhaps ironic, that in the year in which the State commemorated the memory of a group of volunteer, patriotic men and women who were not professional soldiers, that the Irish Reserve Defence Forces should be so mishandled and mistreated, despite all of the added value that it provides to the State.

In conclusion, those who should be ensuring that the Reserve is maintained and grown as per the 2015 White Paper on Defence seem to care very little about the future of the force. And so, we are here today in the hopes of improving the fortunes of this great and proud asset to the State before it is too late.

Thank you, and I would now like to invite questions from members of the Committee.