



## **RACO Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence - 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023**

*A Chathaoirleach, ba mhaith linn ár bhuíochas a ghabháil libh as ucht an chuiridh a thug an Coiste dúinn labhairt anseo inniu.*

Chairman, members of the Committee and Secretariat, we are privileged to be afforded the opportunity to join you today to give the perspective of the Officers of Óglaigh na hÉireann on the current issues affecting our members and the Defence Forces. I am joined by Comdt Martin Ryan, RACO President, Lt Cdr Cian O'Mearáin from our Naval Service Committee, Comdt Amy Colclough from 2 Bde and Capt Jamie Bray representing the Air Corps and our Post 2013 members. RACO represents over 95% of all Commissioned officers and is therefore well placed to confidently speak to the challenges that are facing our membership and the wider Defence Forces.

As the Committee will no doubt note, most of the issues we will discuss today have featured in RACO's previous appearances before this Committee, in 2019 and 2021. Indeed, the only thing that really has changed is the strength of the organisation, and not for the better. Our members have noted the largely positive outlook presented to this Committee last week, underpinned by reporting on the implementation of the Recommendations of the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces but the reality is unfortunately somewhat different. Grand plans, with reports done and boxes ticked, may be presented as success in certain quarters, but for the vast majority of serving personnel it all means very little. Promises of a bright future are welcome and indeed necessary, but our members are becoming accustomed to false dawns. The Defence Forces have been in a state of slow decline for almost a decade, and it has reached the point where this is becoming irreversible; indeed, the attrition rate is intensifying, as the rate of reduction in strength clearly shows. Numerous reviews and Commissions have touched on the root cause of this decline, without addressing it – the failure to

adequately resource Defence in order to retain highly qualified & experienced personnel to maintain capability.

The only true metric of this human capability of the Defence Forces is its strength versus establishment. The ambition for 2028 is 11,500. The recently updated current establishment is 9,600. In June 2021, I asked this Committee if we had reached the bottom yet, when there were 8,580 personnel. As of the 31<sup>st</sup> of August this year (the latest date for which we have figures available), the strength stood at 7,671<sup>1</sup>. personnel, or 79.9% of establishment – and only 66.7% of the desired 2028 establishment

When the level of institutionalised vacancies are taken into account, encompassing personnel currently overseas, preparing for or just returned from overseas, on statutory leave, long term training and education, on induction training, and instructing that training, the numbers don't add up to 80% at all; it might not even reach 50% on an average day. And that is just the Army; what about the Air Corps? And the Naval Service? Why is that so few aircraft are operational? Why is it that three quarters of the State's fleet are tied up in Haulbowline?

Recruitment is important and necessary, but so is retention. Expertise, in any field, never mind the complex world of defence, can only be developed through experience. The fine Cadets, Recruits and Apprentices joining the Defence Forces have ambition and potential – but they lack experience. And thrusting them into positions of responsibility to fill gaps without the time to gain that experience is a recipe for disaster. As a case in point over 500 Officers or just about 40% have five years Commissioned service or less. This has severe implications for governance and supervision and increases organisational risk.

Look at what was achieved last week with just one ship, one helicopter, and highly qualified personnel in a joint operation with other State agencies and international bodies. Imagine what could be achieved if the Defence Forces was properly resourced for its current establishment, never mind the 2028 ambitions. The success of last week highlights the positive contribution that the Defence Forces, and its dedicated personnel, can make to the State. Without adequately trained, motivated, and incentivised personnel, the Defence Forces cannot contribute anything.

Last week, this Committee heard that over 95% of the early actions recommended from the Commission on the Defence Forces are now complete. But what has really been *completed*? The HLAP's Early Actions are littered with words like

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<sup>1</sup> Army strength stood at 6,221 or 82. 2%; Air Corps 695 or 76.3%; and Navy only 755 or 67.47%.

“commence”, “evaluate”, “develop”, “explore”, and “progress”. Words like “actioned”, “implemented” or “delivered” are largely absent; a significant point given that it is meant to be an “Action Plan”. Some work has been undertaken, and certain improvements have happened, particularly for enlisted personnel. But in truth, of the 95% reported as completed, very few have yet to have any impact “on the ground” or – going back to my first key point – on retention.

As Richard Branson said, ***‘Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don’t want to.’***

The impact of operating with reduced numbers, and the associated stress is felt across the entire Defence Forces. The Army is struggling to fulfil its assigned tasks, domestically and internationally. Ships are unable to go to sea and aircraft are not flying as a result of personnel shortages. Yet the organisation continues to prioritise costly, labour intensive recruitment policies in favour of tangible retention initiatives. The unsustainably high turnover rate and assumption of additional tasks such as the EU Battlegroup leads to the creation of a crippling operational and training tempo for remaining service personnel.

Inadequate supervision and mentoring combined with insufficient trained manning levels leads to inevitable burnout, and creates serious concerns for governance, and the ability to manage risk and ensure the wellbeing of our personnel.

While pay and allowances have been repeatedly described as “significantly” improved, the reality is that while they have improved somewhat for new entrant enlisted personnel, the extent of these improvements has been exaggerated; and still does not reflect the time commitment many Defence Forces personnel, particularly commissioned officers, commit.

It is impossible to make a value judgment on the appropriateness or fairness of pay rates when the organisation does not even know how many hours its people are working. How many other public or private sector employers treat their workers like this, with not even a defined working day or week?

Furthermore, many key pay and allowance improvements have not, nor likely will be, implemented in the short term or at all; and many of those that have, only benefit enlisted personnel. A key example of this is Specialised Instructors Allowance, vital to incentivise and reward quality instruction, but denied to our instructor members. White Paper projects, Pay Commission recommendations and Allowance review mechanisms promised by Ministers and Department officials have seemingly disappeared into thin air. And in the meantime, highly

educated and experienced personnel are leaving for better conditions and work life balance in the public and private sectors.

The Commission on the Defence Forces recommendation that Working Time Directive implementation should be urgently negotiated between management and representative associations was an early action of the High Level Action Plan. We have consistently argued that a failure to provide adequate rest and compensatory time off to military personnel significantly impacts their home-life and the ability of many to sustain a career in the Defence Forces. For too long management has treated members' time as an infinite resource, without consideration of work life balance, and the fact that our organisation has never even recorded working time, in contravention of EU law, and still does not, denies DF members access to benefits such as overtime which are available to other public sector employees. However, in stark contrast to members of An Garda Síochána, the Prison Service and indeed all other public sector organisations, our own Department and Minister do not appear to think us worthy of participating in a collective agreement on implementation. Notwithstanding strong commitments made by Government to urgent implementation, the can is seemingly being further kicked down the road, with negotiations paused since May of this year, and delivery timelines apparently extending without consultation.

Last week the Committee heard from our Chief of Staff, who said that on Pensions that *"from the key takeaways and analysis of the exit surveys we have done, the pension issue has not arisen."* RACO's own research of officers retiring voluntarily between 2020 and 2022 indicate that the vast majority (78%) did not receive an exit interview or survey at all – perhaps leading to an incomplete interpretation of the "key takeaways" mentioned last week. For officers commissioned since 2013, pensions *are* a significant issue; as an example, 22% of the first Cadet Class (90<sup>th</sup>) commissioned with this pension scheme have already left the Defence Forces, and 79% of Post 2013 officers have told us that they do not see a long term future in the organisation due to inadequate pension arrangements.

The Chief of Staff was not wrong when he stated that central issues affecting personnel include (a lack of) job satisfaction, work-life balance, working conditions, the uncertainty of postings, allowances, and the pressures of work overall. But to discount an issue that affects and will continue to affect an ever growing proportion of serving personnel, and particularly officers who are expected to lead is concerning. In 2021, the Chief of Staff told the Pensions Commission that *"the current Single Pension Scheme acts as a catalyst, pushing*

*the DF's greatest asset (our people) to prematurely decide to depart the PDF. This affects operational capability and military effectiveness. As the principal military advisor to the Minister for Defence, it behoves me to advocate for special arrangements for the PDF personnel inducted under the Single Pension Scheme in order to compensate them for the unique nature and requirement of Military Service."*

So, what has changed?

Much time and effort has been spent on the important issue of culture within the Defence Forces; and the association of the actions of a few with the conduct of the vast majority has had a significant and negative impact on morale. The revelations of the Women of Honour in September 2021 have rightly shone a light on areas of unacceptable behaviour within the organisation, past and present, particularly for female personnel, and RACO welcomes the statutory Tribunal of Inquiry which must establish the facts and bring closure to victims of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment.

The continued focus on and extensive use of the word "culture" to malign the vast majority of our dedicated Defence Forces personnel and be used as *the* single most important benchmarking measurement of the organisation's effectiveness ignores the other systemic issues afflicting the Defence Forces. Again, most critically, the lack of resourcing and failure to retain suitably qualified and experienced personnel.

RACO and PDFORRA, through our former membership of the Independent Monitoring Group's supervisory board, were once key stakeholders in addressing these negative workplace themes and frequently raised concerns that management was not using the agreed processes to the fullest possible extent in addressing and correcting reoccurring issues. The serious concerns raised tell us that no organisation can be complacent when it comes to unacceptable or criminal behaviour; we must all strive to keep the Defence Forces strong and vibrant but above all safe and welcoming for all members. The representative associations must be at the heart of ensuring that safety and wellbeing.

We continue to strongly believe in the value of the well-established IMG process, which has been buried. We know that we have a positive supervisory role to play in ensuring a healthy working climate for our members. The link between inadequate supervision, mentoring and governance, and inappropriate behaviour and administration of complaints remains undeniable. Sadly, telling us that we are stakeholders while treating us as outsiders is all too familiar and a recipe for failure. We have experienced this exclusion from process throughout the recent

CoDF High Level Action Plan too, which followed the pattern experienced by DF representation through the White Paper, Climate Survey, Working Time Directive and High Level Implementation Plan.

Last week this Committee was told by the Secretary General and Chief of Staff about the new Strategic Framework for the Defence Forces, and were advised that the Tánaiste has stated, *“The priority within this transformation is cultural change above all else.”* They advised that in addition to the culture change, there are also transformation actions that will ensure the Defence Forces is an equal opportunities employer, reflective of contemporary Irish society, providing a safe workplace and a fit-for-purpose organisation, equipped to defend the State and meet the challenges of today and the future, an organisation where all members are treated with dignity and respect. We thoroughly endorse this ambition. However: this cultural change must include the senior management of the Departments of Defence and Public Expenditure, whose dismissive, apathetic and frustrating approach to our conciliation and arbitration scheme has manifested itself in a complete abuse of a dominant position. We are engaging in a process of review of our Conciliation and Arbitration Scheme, and it is no exaggeration to say that if real and meaningful change does not occur, then the Scheme is dead.

The Scope of Representation is clearly laid down in Defence Force Regulations and should be understood by everyone. The manner in which senior management, both civil and at times military have deliberately suppressed employee voice in the organisation through a refusal to consult on matters that are clearly within scope, is an extremely poor reflection on their attitude to not just representation in the Defence Forces, but every soldier, sailor, aircrew, NCO and officer alike. There are many recent examples, and it is only getting worse. This must change if the organisation is to survive and ultimately, in time, thrive.

Normal Public Service employment conditions do not apply to those in the Defence Forces. Serving Defence Forces personnel forfeit “normal employee status” while remaining subject to military law at all times. They have no right to strike and can be called on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days of the year. They have an unlimited liability contract which requires them to face hardship and danger for the benefit of others. Personnel are subject to mandatory early retirement and are subject to annual (military standard) medical and fitness testing.

Defence Management’s obligation, in recognition of these service restrictions and IR limitations, *should* be to advocate strongly on behalf of Defence Forces personnel. What RACO Members see is an ongoing failure to compensate for our lack of fundamental employee rights, and in so doing to ensure that the Defence Forces are not disadvantaged relative to other Public Service employees. Indeed,

the inability of military personnel to withdraw labour has been exploited by an adversarial and dysfunctional industrial relations climate which has been to the detriment of the well-being of the most loyal citizens of this State.

Gandhi said that *“A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members”*.

We willingly accept the restrictions on civil liberties that are part and parcel of military service; but this cannot be completely taken for granted by government. In turn, government should be compensating DF members for the unique nature of military service and the sacrifices that members and their families make. Instead, the formerly well recognised and beneficial aspects of military service that attracted, and more importantly retained highly qualified and experienced personnel, and offset this lack of employment rights, are stripped away.

The most important Key Performance Indicator, and measure of whether employment policies and conditions of service are attractive and effective is the strength of the organisation. This is the one statistic that cannot be fudged and cannot be spun. At 80% of current establishment, and 66% of required establishment, the evidence is clear; the obsession with recruitment over retention is not working. It is time for real transformation, and that starts with changing the habit of a lifetime, and listening to employee voice, rather than continuing to sideline it. This takes humility, self-awareness and real leadership, and is badly needed.

Government has within its power the ability to quickly remedy many of the retention difficulties being experienced by Óglaigh na hÉireann and to begin to rehabilitate this proud and loyal organisation. Small retention measures such as Patrol Duty Allowance, Instructors Allowance, supplementary pension and the recording of working time can be implemented in days but would have long lasting benefits. It is for Government to decide whether we are finally going to take the security of our State seriously and resource and retain our Defence Forces personnel.

A Chathaoirleach, we thank you and the Committee for your time, and we are happy to take questions.