

IRELAND'S DEFENCE FORCES IN CRISIS

Recent research by University of Limerick has raised concerns over leadership, performance and career management within the Defence Forces. Overall the results can be read as a damning indictment of neglect by the Government, stagnation by the Department of Defence, and poor internal military leadership, writes Michael Murphy, security intelligence consultant.

Serious pay and morale problems within the Defence Forces have come to light and have been subject of media scrutiny. This stems from research conducted by a team from University of Limerick (UL) and follows from a previous survey within the forces which revealed negative results concerning leadership, performance management, career management, and, aspects of commitment.

In general, the research covers pay and issues affecting morale. Due to austerity during the past few years the pay of military service personnel has deteriorated. At the same time detrimental human resource policies, a botched reorganisation of the army, and failure to invest in the three services has compounded feelings of political neglect.

The fact that since 2011, An Taoiseach has failed to appoint a full time Minister for Defence has generated feelings that defence, national security, and service personnel are very low in government priorities.

CONSTANT REVIEWS & REFORMS

Since the mid-1980s the Defence Forces has been under constant review, reorganisation, and reform. Some reforms have been successful while others have been detrimental to the efficiency, effectiveness, and ultimately the outcomes of the services provided.

The purpose of the Defence Forces is to maintain a 'contingent capability', that is to say a capability to act in the event that it is needed. This capability needs to cover the full spectrum of military operations from aid to the civil authority, such as flood relief, right up to war fighting.

However, there is no mechanism for independently evaluating that military capability, nor do the government even consider it, so it is not surprising that in recent years it has significantly eroded. As a consequence, taxpayers are not getting value for money from their taxes and the Defence Forces are unlikely to be able to respond in a real crisis

Young people do not join the Defence Forces for an easy life but are attracted by 'a life less ordinary' including the possibility of overseas service and adventure. However, after joining they find that they are perhaps victims of what one might call 'false advertising' and discover that their lives are not merely ordinary



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael C. Murphy spent over 40 years in the Defence Forces before retiring in 2013 as Deputy Director of Military Intelligence at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. During his early officer career he served in operational and intelligence roles on the border facing South Armagh.

Subsequently he held intelligence, operational and command roles, at Defence Forces Headquarters and the 2 Eastern Brigade before returning to Defence Forces intelligence where he completed his career.

During his career he served in overseas operational and command appointments with the UN and NATO in Lebanon (1978, 1986, 1991) Eritrea (2002) Afghanistan (2006) and Kosovo (2008). His extensive operational and intelligence experience is complemented by several educational and training qualifications earned at home and abroad, including a Diploma in Strategic Intelligence, and an MSc in Security and Risk Management at the University of Leicester.

Since retiring from the military he has provided security intelligence consultancy services to private industry and has become a leading commentator across the Irish media on security and intelligence issues.

He is founder and CEO of SITARMS Ltd, which provides security intelligence, threat and risk management services.

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but that there is a struggle to survive.

As a consequence there has been a steady outflow of expensively trained and valuable personnel. Replacements require funding to train which can take a number of years; in the meantime skills are lost and not available if required. This is not an efficient method of spending taxpayers' hard earned cash.

WORKING IN HARMONY

Successful military cohesion creates successful effective military forces and produces outputs far exceeding individual parts. Cohesion is successful when four elements work in harmony.

The first element is 'horizontal bonding' or 'primary cohesion'. Here, soldiers are encouraged to form friendships resulting in the development of trust and dependencies which results in a 'network of mutual obligations'. Research shows that in difficult circumstances it's this important element that keeps service personnel working together, each looking out for the other.

The second element 'vertical bonding' has been described as the bonding between soldiers and the leaders that they see every day. For this to be successful there is a requirement that the leaders and the group remain together for a considerable time.

The third element is 'hierarchical' or 'secondary cohesion', where soldiers form an identification with their units or regiments and in turn accept leaders' goals and values as their own.

Not alone that but they also form 'an imagined community' with those who have

gone before them in that unit. As a result they develop unit pride and will go the extra mile not to let the side down.

The final element is known as 'societal attitudes'. This is successful when society genuinely appreciates their military, which in turn will sustain extra burdens. Of course it is a truism that most societies view their military with some disdain and as an unnecessary expense on scarce resources.

That is until an emergency or a serious unexpected dangerous situation arises requiring immediate action. Just like being at home it is only when something goes wrong that the expense of insurance is finally viewed as a wise investment.

LACK OF MILITARY COHESION

Low morale and lack of cohesion are very evident in the UL research report. Much of the negative comments arise from two factors, which together have been a disaster and have been extremely damaging to military cohesion: a human resources management system that is dysfunctional, and a reduction of the army from three to two brigades resulting in personnel being moved all over the country.

Current Defence Forces leadership difficulties stem from a promotion system based on 'merit' implemented in the mid-1990s. While it is meant to reward merit in essence, it is based on a transaction between the superior and the lower rank. Wise officers understand that any adverse comment in their annual report from their superior officer is detrimental to their chances for promotion.

SECURITY ANALYSIS

As a consequence, officers know they must not do anything to upset their superior or adversely affect their superior's changes of promotion.

Norman Frank Dixon (MBE) was a British psychologist most noted for his 1976 book 'On the Psychology of Military Incompetence'.

In his book he describes this system as '*stick to the rule book, do nothing without explicit approval from the next higher up, always conform, never offend your superiors, and you will float serenely if a trifle slowly upwards*'. Younger officers are increasingly refusing to buy into this system.

THE ARMY'S BACKBONE

Non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are the backbone of an army and provide all important continuity in units while officers change around.

However in 2012 their promotion system was also changed. Now to get promoted they need to: conform similar to the officers as described above and with similar outcomes; build up points by taking courses, oftentimes with nothing to do with their main functions; constantly change appointments away from their main areas of expertise; and, on promotion be prepared to move to other units far from their original unit and then spend the next few years

trying to get back.

Any independent examination of this system would come to the conclusion that the taxpayer is not being well served by wasteful behaviour that sees expertise being lost in every area of the Defence Forces and enormous costs being spent

to replace them.

The promotion style is turning potential leaders into self-interested individualists at tax payers' expense, and a system that separates leaders from their subordinates. It can be concluded that there is a crisis in Defence Forces that needs fixing.

