

'SHADOW WARRIORS' LIFTS THE LID ON IRELAND'S SPECIAL FORCES



ARW member of the Special Operations Maritime Task Unit (SOMTU) pictured during a training exercise (2016).

A new book 'Shadow Warriors: The Irish Army Ranger Wing' is the first and only authoritative account of this secretive special forces unit that looks at their inception, advanced training and operations at home and overseas, without breaching operational procedures or tactics, which still remain a secret, writes co-author Sgt Wayne Fitzgerald.

This year marks the 40th anniversary since the Army Ranger Wing (ARW) was established by the Irish Defence Forces' in March 1980.

The ARW was officially designated as 'Sciathán Fianóglach an Airm', and as there is no English translation of 'Fianóglach' the internationally recognised designation of 'Ranger' is used.

The word 'Fianóglach' links the traditions of the ARW to 'Na Fianna', the legendary Irish warriors, and also with Óglaigh na hÉireann (Irish Defence Forces).

The ARW's roles are divided

into conventional warfare, such as offensive operations behind enemy lines, like long-range patrols (LRP), raids, ambushes, sabotage, counter-insurgency, and other tasks.

The ARW is also a specialist aid to the civil power (ATCP) in anti-terrorist taskings including anti-hijack, hostage rescue, airborne and seaborne interventions, close protection of VIPs and counter terrorist/subversive threats, amongst others.

MODULAR TRAINING COURSE

The Army Ranger Wing's Special Operations Force Qualification (SOFQ) Course is open to all serving members



ARW team conduct counter-terrorism assault training on a ferry in the Irish Sea (2011).

of the Defence Forces, serving in the Army, Naval Service or Air Corps, both male and female. The SOFQ is a 36-week modular training course that requires a high level of physical fitness and mental fitness.

The SOFQ syllabus is designed to test and assess all aspects of the candidate's character, military skills, ability and general suitability to become a member of the ARW. Successful completion provides the potential unit member with all the skills and knowledge necessary to function in the role of a Special Operations Force (SOF) assault team operator.

The failure rate is very high, with only a small percentage making the cut to be the 'best of the best'. The Army Ranger Wing train hard and continuously work on their SOF tactics, techniques and procedures, where they use the unit's 40 years of evolving knowledge and experience of operating at home and overseas, along with their co-operation with other security services and foreign special force units.

ARW assault team operators are held in a state of readiness 24/7, 365 days of the year, where operators are on-call to their command centre in the Curragh Camp, Co. Kildare. Operators are allocated into platoons and teams as per their skill sets.

They are constantly training and upskilling in all different types of special forces tactics like HALO parachuting, amphibious assault craft, fast-roping from a helicopter, sniping and assaulting in their Ford F-350 Special



ARW Special Operations Maritime Task Unit (SOMTU) conducting boarding drills in the Naval Base, Haulbowline (2016).



ARW Sniper team deployed with an Accuracy International .338 rifle and a MOD A3 Steyr rifle with short barrel in Chad (2008).

Reconnaissance Vehicles (SRV), which other members of the Defence Forces can only hope of doing, someday, if they pass SOFQ.

WIDE RANGE OF OPERATIONAL DUTIES

The ARW started out in the early 1980s during the Troubles, conducting patrols and manning Observation Posts (OPs) while watching subversive activities along the Border area with Northern Ireland, right up until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

They are also on hand for ATCP duties with An Garda Síochána, such as the operation involved in the kidnapping of Don Tidy in 1983. Most recently they would have provided snipers in air support and on the ground as Close Protection to VIP visits such as HM Queen Elizabeth II and other royals and visiting heads of state like US President Donald Trump and US Vice President Michael Pence in June and September 2019 respectively.

As some might know, the Defence Forces have an unbroken record of 62 years of peacekeeping service with the UN since 1958.

Individual members of the ARW will have served overseas during the unit's 40-years of operations, but they cut their teeth as a unit in Somalia in September 1993 just before the Black Hawk Down incident in October 1993, where 18 US Rangers, operating independently of the UN, were killed.

From there, the ARW has served as an initial entry force to missions such as East Timor (1999), Liberia (2003), Chad (2008), right up to their present mission in Mali since September 2019. Two ARW teams were deployed in a response to an upsurge in violence in northern Mali, which is led by Al Qaeda affiliated militant groups.

The ARW teams are conducting long-



ARW Operatives pictured during a joint exercise 'Ullamh' with An Garda Síochána (December 2017).



Published in April 2020, 'Shadow Warriors' tells the story behind the creation of the Army Ranger Wing from its origins in the 1960s and 70s to its formation in 1980 and subsequent history. Priced at €12.99 the book is available from www.mercierpress.ie/irish-books/shadow-warriors-book/



ARW Operatives during an exercise in Fort Davis, Cork.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Paul O'Brien, a military historian, works for the Office of Public Works at the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham. An author of 16 books, Paul has written extensively on the military strategy of the 1916 Rising, as well as the British Army in Ireland. Two of his books, *Blood on the Streets* and *Crossfire*, were turned into the critically acclaimed drama-documentary *A Terrible Beauty*. He lives in Santry, Dublin with his wife, daughter and two cats.

Sergeant Wayne Fitzgerald joined the Defence Forces in 1990, serving initially with the 5 Inf Bn. During his 30-year career he has worked in a number of roles within the Army and Air Corps. In 2011 he was detached to Defence Forces HQ to work on www.military.ie and in May 2011 he was appointed editor of *An Cosantóir* (The Defender) The Defence Forces Magazine, until May 2020. Wayne has served overseas as a peacekeeper with the UN, EU and NATO PfP in Lebanon (1991), Kosovo (2002, 2010) and Bosnia (2008).



Pictured (l-r): Sgt Wayne Fitzgerald and Paul O'Brien were presented with the European Military Press Association (EMPA) Award for Best Article in 2013.

range reconnaissance patrols, with direct action. This requires speed, mobility and flexibility and the ARW has continuously trained for these types of mission.

EU BATTLEGROUP TRAINING

The UN's MINUSMA mission is considered by security experts as the most dangerous one. Since July 2013, 216 MINUSMA peacekeepers and law enforcement personnel have been killed, while over 360 have been seriously injured (as of May 2020).

In February 2020, three Irish ARW SOF operators suffered minor injuries when an improvised explosive device (IED) detonated near their vehicle while conducting a patrol in eastern Mali.

More ARW operatives are currently training for the UN approved German-led EU Battlegroup, which is due to go on operational standby for six months soon. If the Battlegroup were to be called into action the Irish contingent would only be deployed with the Irish government's 'triple-lock' authorisation. To date, no EU Battlegroup has been deployed.



ARW student receiving his Fianóglach (Ranger) tab on passing Special Operations Force Qualification (SOFQ) Course Module 3 (2013).

The ARW missions and operations are not well known or regularly discussed within the media, nor are the identities of ARW operatives, who remain in the shadows in order to

protect themselves and that of the unit. Thus, the unit and its members are shrouded in secrecy both within the Defence Forces and to the public.