



# NAVAL SERVICE TAKES NEW UNIFORMED APPROACH ON BOARD!

As Ireland's Naval Service gets ready to celebrate its 75th anniversary in September, it recently transitioned to a new single operational uniform that will now visually reinforce its identity as a co-equal service within a joint Defence Forces, writes Lt Cdr Cian Ó Mearáin and SCPO/ERA Ruairí de Barra.

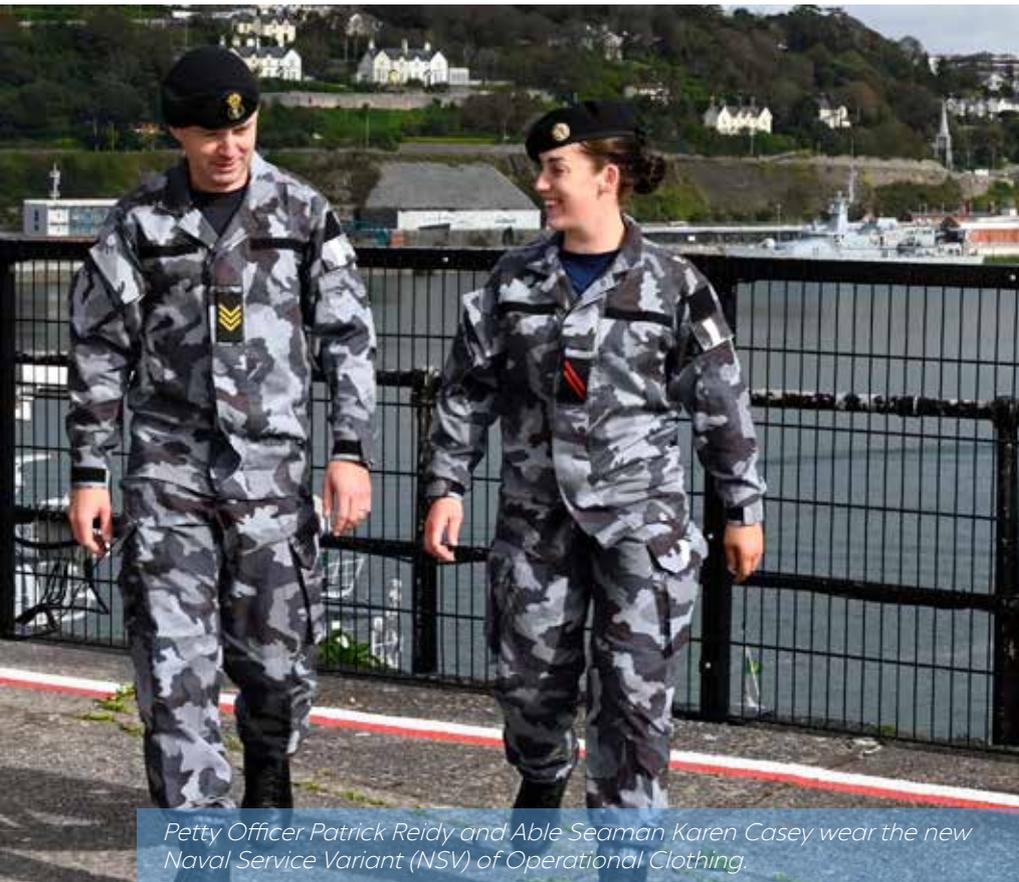
In 2009 the Naval Service, in recognising the need to reduce the number of uniforms, began work to develop a single operational uniform.

One of the key goals of this highly anticipated programme was based on a desire to rationalise a sailor's kit bag to just two uniforms—a ceremonial one and one for everything else. From an operational viewpoint the different tasks undertaken required different clothing, often addressed by adding garments to the scale of issue. From a practical viewpoint, there were simply too many different uniforms.

The General Duty Rig (GDR) was introduced in 2012 as an incremental improvement, but it did not provide

a single operational uniform. As an early champion, Senior Petty Officer (SPO) William Bryant recounts that: "At the direction of the then Flag Officer Commanding the Naval Service (FOCNS), Commodore Hugh Tully, two studies were completed in 2014, on pricing and initial designs. Then he established a full Working Group to re-examine the issue, resulting in the Naval Service Variant (NSV) of the Defence Forces Operational clothing in its distinctive Disruptive Pattern Material (DPM)."

The first hurdle faced by this Working Group was making the case for the change, and to do this the Naval Service had to be clear about its requirements. The maritime



*Petty Officer Patrick Reidy and Able Seaman Karen Casey wear the new Naval Service Variant (NSV) of Operational Clothing.*

everything it needs to sustain maritime defence and security operations in Europe's roughest seas.

Uniforms are part of this unique service culture, and while appearance isn't everything, it must be significant since the first question people often ask is, "Why does the Navy want DPM?"

There are many compelling reasons for this, but they don't relate to camouflage and concealment. This is a strategic clothing change designed to increase the visibility of the Navy, inside and outside the Defence Forces.

**FABRIC SAFETY TO THE FORE**

The Falklands conflict should have finally convinced all of the real danger presented by a fabric which melts when exposed to heat or flame, and then bonds to the skin of a sailor. Polyester melts easily and is unsuitable for wear at sea. Cotton does not melt, but it does burn well. Cotton also has poor

environment has its own particular safety requirements, and with no female or maternity version of the GDR available, this set the framework for assessing all potential solutions against three tests - Does it visually identify the Naval Service as part of a joint Defence Forces? Is it safe in all anticipated environments? Is it equally appropriate for all genders?

**EYES ON THE FUTURE**

The Naval Service dress uniform is typically only observed during ceremonial parades these days, and it contains items of kit, which would have been as familiar to a gunner on a 18th century ship of the line, as they are to today's hi-tech mariners.

The silk, the blue jean collar, the lanyard, the gaiter, and the bell-bottomed trouser, were items of practical use, which were part of the working dress of the fighting sailor. Today, they remain purely as an aspect of tradition.

All military branches have their own culture and language, the Navy more than most. It operates in a harsh environment, in what is essentially a floating self-contained town, carrying



*Maintenance is just a fact of life onboard ships, so the new uniform needs to be hardwearing.*

heat dissipation characteristics, while also having sub-optimal insulation properties.

The Naval Service has always sought a fabric that did not melt when exposed to flame or heat as part of the core of its operational uniform. It was also required to be a lighter weight. This became increasingly important once the Naval Service commenced a series of deployments to the Mediterranean.

These fabrics are sometimes erroneously described as being 'fire retardant'. GDR, for its many steps forward in garment technology had one inherent flaw - it had 'fire retardant' chemicals applied to its threads.

These would only last for a set number of washes, if laundered in unchlorinated water at cool temperatures. Given that fresh water onboard a ship is often mildly chlorinated for safe consumption purposes, and with GDR often being washed at high temperatures to remove the unavoidable oils and greases omnipresent on a working warship, this leads over time to a reduction in the fire retardancy of the materials.

This did not make GDR in any way unsafe; it just returned it to a more regular condition which is less than optimal. This was one of the key reasons for making a leap forward with the new NSV DPM, made from inherently 'no melt' and self-extinguishing materials. Meaning no matter what you do to it, how or how often you wash it, it will, if ever exposed to direct flame or extreme heat, not melt.

**NEED FOR A UNIFORM SYSTEM**

Accepting the need for a uniform system that met these requirements and suited all individuals was not hard; meeting that need and reducing the number of garments took significant effort to re-imagine the status quo.

Often the simplest solution is the best. In this case that solution was adapting the existing DF Operational DPM uniform, which had undergone a recent design evolution itself, with only those extra changes necessary to make it suitable for use in all naval



*As life onboard a ship continues 24/7, sailors need a comfortable uniform to enhance their safety in the event of an emergency.*

applications.

There were changes to the fabric, fasteners, colour and cut of the operational DPM. All of these changes improved the suitability and durability of the NSV. It also increased the cost of each individual garment, yet provided a cost neutral solution over the next four years by substantially reducing the number of garments to be stocked and

issued.

Caroline McAdam from Tailored Image (the company which partnered with the Defence Forces on the development of this new uniform), is an expert in the production of military clothing. "The project commenced with Tailored Image replacing the treated flame-retardant fabric with an inherent flame-



*Constant training, such as 20mm Rheinmetall Training, is required to ensure that ships are able to respond when required. This new uniform helps personnel to enable this mission.*

retardant fabric," she says.

"By doing so, we not only greatly improved the flame-retardant protection for the wearer but by introducing ripstop construction to the fabric, we ensured that the fabric's physical properties were enhanced in terms of both durability and air permeability."

**MEETING THE REQUIREMENTS**

Commodore Micheal Malone, FOCNS, says that the new uniform "...comes at an important time for the Naval Service as we set about our regeneration programme. The Naval Service can now complete its variety of roles on land and at sea in a standardised operational uniform that personnel can be proud of. This professional uniform is easily recognisable as being synonymous with the Defence Forces while maintaining our unique maritime identity."

Looking to the future, Commodore Malone emphasises the positives that the culmination of this project brings: "While enhancing safety, improving jointness and interoperability and addressing gender equality; this new uniform will meet the requirements and challenges that we will face."

Bernard Brit, owner of Tailored Image, says the company is very



*The distinctive design of Defence Forces woodland pattern forms the base pattern of the Naval Service Variant.*

proud of the result in terms of performance, functionality and general aesthetics. "We have a very strong R&D and Technical team working on multiple projects across military and blue-light users at any point in time. Clothing is a very emotive subject, so it was also very important that we listened to the uniform wearer's expectations," he

notes.

No article on the new Naval Service uniform would be complete without mentioning the outstanding work that the Central Supply Stores (CSS) performed in devising, implementing and administering the roll-out programme during the necessary restrictions due to the pandemic.



*The Tailored Image team who worked with the Defence Forces to deliver the new uniform.*



## VIEW BELOW THE DECKS

The working environment of a modern naval warship, bristling with powerful armaments and 21st century technology, is complex. Out there, far from sight, over the horizon, you must always be ready to counter whatever threats the ocean, or operations, may throw at you.

So, while the science and policy behind the provision of the NSV DPM is important, the daily practicalities of the new operational dress will be at the forefront of the sailor's mind.

The average Able Rating<sup>[1]</sup> will be in uniform for almost 18 hours a day while at sea. For most of these waking hours, the majority of the ship's company are involved in some form of work.

Maintenance is an immutable fact of a life at sea. The NSV DPM will make the physical aspects of that work more comfortable. It will be harder wearing, more breathable, and safer. It will not remove the need for personal protective equipment such as overalls for those extraordinarily dirty jobs, such as painting and greasing, which are needed to keep each vessel shipshape.

While NSV DPM will be slightly more forgiving of the occasional mishap, all sailors know another fact only too well, woe betide the sailor who would present with slovenly dress on morning divisions, or on handover of a watch should the Coxn's eye fall upon them!

## BONDS LAST A LIFETIME

A final and universal fact of military service is that all personnel bind together in the shared identity of their profession and their service. These bonds forged through shared hardships and experiences, last a lifetime. We sailors remember that we are only caretakers of a proud tradition of service, which has been 75 years in the making.

We work hard to instil that pride in every recruit who comes to the Naval Service HQ at Haulbowline. We respect the enormous privilege granted to us in becoming part of this heritage through our service to the state.

So, within this new clothing is new technology and new features, which brings us in line with the operational uniforms of the other two branches of the Defence Forces.

Yet it is still a re-affirmation of our unique identity as the principal seagoing agency of the state, as the maritime component of the Óglaigh na hÉireann.

### Reference:

*[1] Able Rating: All ratings are sailors, but not all sailors are seamen. The use of the word 'Able' is to designate a sailor who is fully qualified in their specialist role. The term comes from 'able bodied' or 'fully fit' for duties. Rating is a term used to describe all enlisted sailors who are rated or assigned a specialisation. These ratings include seaman gunners, communications operatives, logistical operatives, mechanics, artificers etc.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Lt Cdr Cian Ó'Mearain

joined the Naval Service as a graduate in 1995. Following cadestship and further training he took up the position of Marine Engineering Officer on LÉ EMER in January 2002. He has served at sea on all class of naval ships and a wide variety of shore appointments, and he has also competed one overseas mission in the Western Sahara.



He holds a BEng in Mechanical Engineering from Brunel University, an MBA from the Open University, and an MA in Leadership Management and Defence Studies from Maynooth University, as well as being a Chartered Engineer.

Cian has also completed military training and education with the Royal Navy in HMS Sultan, the US Navy at Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and has completed the Senior Command and Staff Course at the Military College in the Defence Forces Training Centre.

### SCPO Ruairí de Barra

is the Senior Enlisted Leader of the Mechanical Engineering and Naval Dockyard Unit of the Irish Naval Service. An Engine Room Artificer by trade and a Marine Engineer by qualification, he has



served for 23 years; including service overseas on Operations PONTUS and SOPHIA. He holds a BA in Leadership, Management and Naval Studies from CIT, and a MComm in Government and Public Policy from UCC.

Ruairí received the inaugural 'MJ Costello' award in 2017 from *An Cosantóir*, and has been twice nominated for the European Military Press Associations awards. He is a regular contributor to *An Cosantóir*, and his work has also featured in 'Emergency Services Ireland', and 'CONTACT' (the Australian Armed Forces magazine).

An elected representative of PDFORRA for 16 years, Ruairí is the Assistant Secretary of the Naval Base and Dockyard District Dommittee.