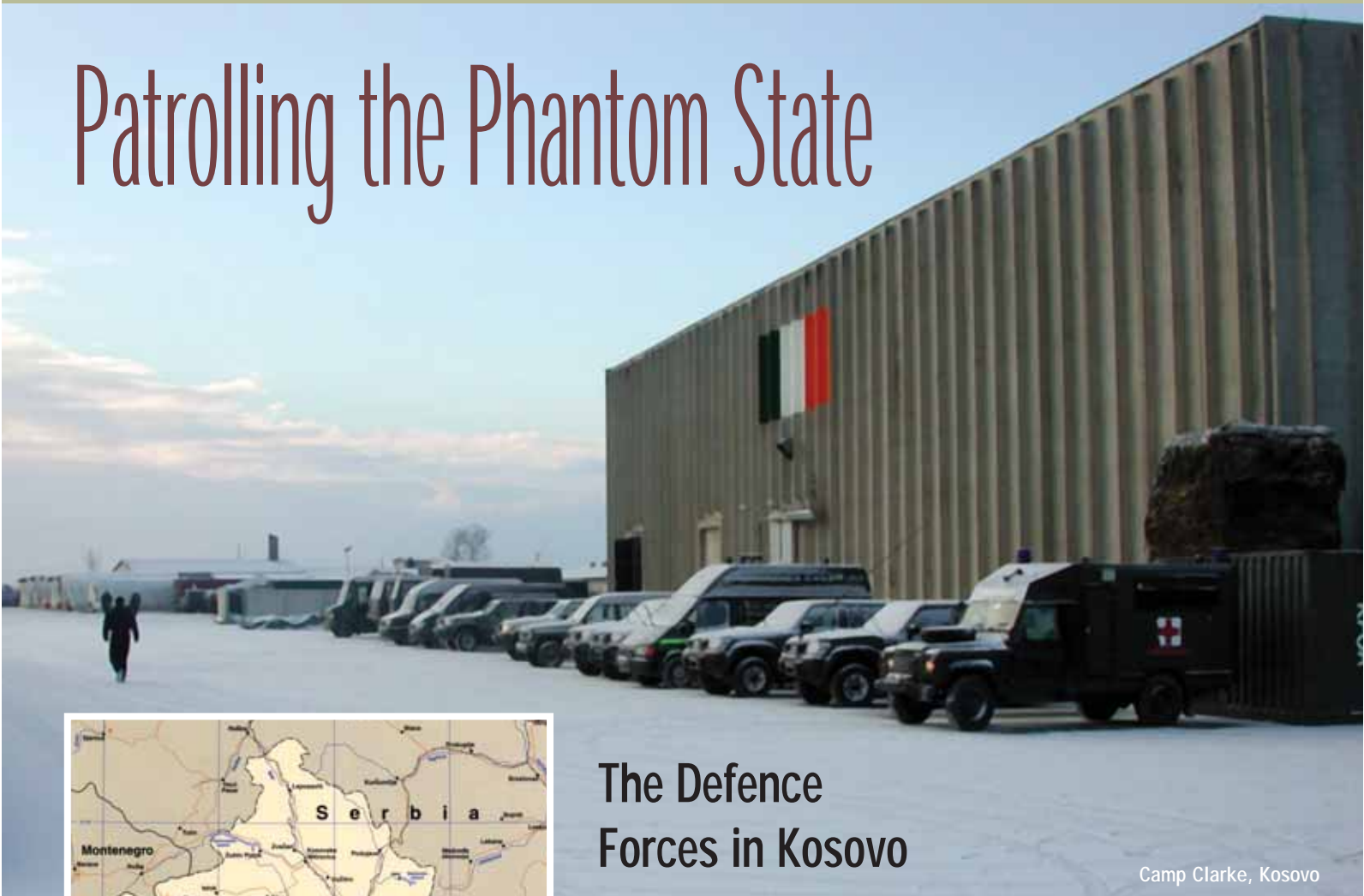


Patrolling the Phantom State



The Defence Forces in Kosovo

Camp Clarke, Kosovo



The Irish mission in Kosovo is the Defence Forces first infantry deployment as part of a NATO led international force. Patrolling an area where ethnic tensions remains high, the Irish Infantry company group works alongside members of the Finnish military in a joint battlegroup. SIGNAL reports from Kosovo. By Ruairi Kavanagh.

Modern day evidence of a conflict-laden history is everywhere in Kosovo, this troubled landlocked province, where ethnic hatred combines with the base desire for revenge. Its lush plains and isolated villages have resonated with violence, terror and war for centuries. Today, this embattled region is in limbo. Following the brutality of Slobadan Milosevic's crackdown on the Kosovar Albanians in 1999 and the retaliatory 78 days of airstrikes by NATO forces, the people of Kosovo live in an administrative

vacuum. Governed by a UN interim administration, the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), and with peace maintained by over 19,000 KFOR troops, the future for the region is anything but certain. On 1st of October 2003 an Irish Infantry Company was integrated to the Finnish Battalion structure and Finnish / Irish Battle Group (FIN/IRL BG KFOR) was formed. This is the first time that an Irish Infantry Company has been placed under operational control of another nation as part of a Battle Group.

According to Commandant Kieran Butler, the presence of KFOR troops is still very necessary in this area of the former Yugoslavia. "With the exception of the UNMIK administration, there is really no functional government in Kosovo. The conflict here is still very recent and the memories of some of the things that happened here in 1999 are still very fresh. Our duties as part of the Finnish/Irish joint battlegroup include providing monitoring patrols in our area of operations, gathering intelligence on any possible threat to KFOR troops or the local populace and through



Irish and Finnish troops taking part in a joint checkpoint near the village of Janjevo.

our CIMIC (civil/military cooperation) function we can assist both Kosovar Serb and Kosovar Albanian villages to improve their quality of life." Comdt Butler is part of the Irish contingent, mainly from the Eastern Brigade, serving at both Camp Clarke and Camp Karhu in the Lipljan area, south of the capital, Pristina. This contingent, called the 27th infantry group and under the command of Lt Col Michael Finn replaced the Irish transport company which had served with KFOR since 1999. There are also Irish personnel serving in the Swedish led Brigade headquarters in the region also in KFOR Main HQ, on the outskirts of Pristina. There are also personnel in Skopje, the Macedonian capital, to the south. Altogether, the Irish presence in the region is numbered at 261, all ranks.

The FIN/IRL BG is composed of the headquarters and three companies, located at various bases. The battlegroup Headquarters as well as the Headquarters and Logistics Company (HQ&LogCoy) are in Camp Ville near the centre of Lipljan. 'A' Company is responsible for the area of Kosovo Polje and also has reconnaissance troops. 'A' Company is based in the area north of Lipljan near the village of Suvi Do. 'B' Company controls the largest part of the areas of municipalities of Lipljan, Glogovac and Stimlje. The platoons of 'C' Company, the Irish Company are located at camps Clarke and Karhu. These two Irish camps, Clarke and Karhu, are situated within a 15 minute drive of each other. Camp Clarke provides administrative and logistics support to Camp Karhu, from where the

operational patrols around the surrounding areas operate. The area where the camps are situated is on a flat plain, flanked on both sides by rolling hills below precipitous mountains. The Irish area of operations includes both Kosovar Serb (K-Serb) and Kosovar Albanian (K-Albanian) villages. Camp Clarke is situated near the large K-Albanian town of Lipljan while Camp Karhu is in the K-Serb village of Donja Gusterica.

The brutality which characterised the events of 1999 in this area was explained when we visited the village of Slovinje. Lieutenant Ed Holland explained the events of 15th April 1999 as we stood on a hill overlooking this non-descript village. Slovinje does however have two striking features. Looking down the steep hill on Slovinje, you notice a graveyard with a prominent memorial to your right while on the left, the dark brown shells of destroyed houses.

Camp Clarke provides administrative and logistics support to Camp Karhu, from where the patrols around the surrounding areas operate.



Irish MOWAG patrol near Slovinje.

The Massacre At Slovinje

“What occurred here in 1999 was the largest atrocity in the Lipljan Municipal area. On the 15th of April that year, Serbians arrived into this village. They numbered approximately 150, a mixture of police, militia and paramilitary forces. Prior to the war Slovinje was a mixed Serbian and Albanian village, with good relations between both sides. Initially, the troops started writing Serbian symbols and slogans on buildings throughout the village. They then started breaking into Albanian homes and told the residents to leave the village. This forced evacuation then turned violent, farmers were pulled off tractors, elderly people were pulled out of their houses, random beatings took place on the streets with rifle butts, often in front of women and children. There were instances of Albanians who refused to leave their homes, generally older people. This led to shootings and killings. In one case a grandfather, his two sons and his two grandsons were executed. 18 people died that day in Slovinje. These people were buried in a mass grave by the Serbians, who then left the village. About 800 people from Slovinje and other nearby K-Albanian villages congregated at a place known as the Dell of Deme. This is an area which consists of a two fields, one large and one small, surrounded by woodland. 800 people spent the night outdoors in this location. “At approximately 2pm on April 16th, Serbian’s converged from both sides on the Dell of Deme. They started herding the Kosovar Albanians back towards the village of Slovinje. During this forced movement, they separated women and children from their fathers and husbands. There was an incident where a husband didn’t want to leave his sick wife, so that man was shot dead. Incidents of stripping and beating were common. They then told the people to run into the forest, and while they ran the Serbs opened fire. Approximately 17 people were killed on the 16th of April. All the people in the village of Slovinje would have strong memories of this atrocity and almost all would have lost someone in the massacres, which fuels hostilities to this day.”

The people killed on the first day of the massacre were exhumed and placed in an old school for families to identify. Those killed on the second day were placed in a mass grave by the Serbs, when the Albanians returned to take the bodies back to the village, the mass grave was empty. To this day those 18 bodies have not been found. It is believed that the Serbs moved the bodies to a hidden location. Many Albanians were too frightened to return to Slovinje. Only in June, when KFOR arrived



An Askali child in Gornje Gadimjle. The poverty in Irish patrolled areas can be extreme.

did the people return and begin the painful process of properly burying their dead. In the village you can see a graveyard which was constructed by villagers after the war. The names on the memorial near the gate are those of the dead from the massacre. The steep steps that lead to the graveyard from the village are flanked with lights, which make for an evocative reminder for local people. Tensions between here and

buildings in the Serbian part of the village.” The inter-village tensions that resulted from this massacre now primarily manifest themselves in provocative shows of Serbian and Albanian nationalism, including protests, which can turn violent.

The geography and sociology of the Irish area of operations is diverse and at times that diversity is extreme. Lipljan, where the Battlegroup HQ is located, is in

The inter-village tensions that resulted from this massacre now primarily manifest themselves in provocative shows of Serbian and Albanian nationalism.

the nearby K-Serb village of Dobrotin would be very high, since Kosovar Albanians here believe that Serbs from that village were involved in the massacre. Today Slovinje is only a Kosovar-Albanian village. What was the Serbian quarter has now been reduced to the remains of burnt out houses. “When the Albanians returned to the village,” explains Lt. Holland “they destroyed all the

Kosovar terms quite a modern town. Half an hours drive from there, in the foothills of the surrounding mountains, the Askali (Gypsy) community at Gornje Gadimlje live in abject poverty. Visiting the village with the Irish troops, the first thing you notice is the smell. This comes from a pitiful stream clogged full of rubbish and effluent that runs through the centre of the ramshackle



Commandant Kieran Butler.

village. Here the village leader, Besim Limaani, explains that entire families must survive on as little as €60 a month. The villagers collect plastic bottles to burn for

the winter to substitute often meager supplies of wood. It is in villages such as this that the presence of the Irish troops is visibly appreciated. As it is in every village they go to, it is the children who are the most enthusiastic. The previous evening while on night patrol in the picturesque surroundings of the village of Janjevo, a child made a point of taking what few sweets she had and presenting them to members of the Irish patrol. While the extreme poverty is an eye-opener the distrust between the two communities often manifests itself in a surreally sad way. An example of this is the village of Rabovce, where the humble village school is shared by both Serbs and Albanians. However, the school is strictly divided between the two and they do not interact at all. There is no pooling of teaching talent and no sharing of resources. Even the children are allocated different play-times in the schoolyard. The Albanian head teacher once taught his counterpart on the Serbian side of the school. When the two men meet by arrangement in the play-

ground they exchange an unusually warm welcome, but after a brief interview when they talk about the possibility of reconciliation in between blaming each other they leave in separate directions, once more resuming their separate lives. Dealing with this sort of animosity is part and parcel of the work for Irish troops.

Unique Challenges In Kosovo

In Camp Karhu, Captain Lorraine Fahey and Commandant Larry MacEoin oversee the operations for both foot patrols and mechanised patrols of the surrounding area. They explain to SIGNAL the differing nature of a NATO led operation such as KFOR and how the Irish troops are integrating with their Finnish counterparts.

“Every mission is different, but as a NATO led mission this is different to anything we’ve ever experienced before,” says Comdt MacEoin. “We don’t find it a particular challenge dealing with the Finns, since we get on with them very well and we have a long tradition of dealing with other national forces on overseas missions - it’s the result

Entire families must survive on as little as €60 a month. The villagers collect plastic bottles to burn for the winter to substitute often meagre supplies of wood.



Slovinje from a nearby hill: To the right is the graveyard, the dark plaque has the names of those massacred in 1999 inscribed on it.



Irish troops on patrol in Gornje Gadimlje.

of accumulated overseas experience since 1958. But this is a NATO mission, and that's a first for us. This is the first time we've been involved in this type of structure under the flag of NATO. That is a particular challenge as we've had to adapt NATO terminology and NATO procedures. On top of that we had to adapt to the particular peace-support requirements of this mission."

"The Finns have provided great assistance for us since our mission started here," says Captain Fahey. Camp Karhu, from where the Irish now operate from, was purchased from the Finns for 'C' Company to operate from. The handover of the Camp took place in October 2003. "When we first arrived, the Finnish troops were still in Karhu and they took a lot of time to show us the base and to familiarise us with it. They made the whole process a lot easier."

The scale of the workload which the Irish troops undertake on the KFOR mission is surprising to the independent observer. The fact that they couple military efficiency with a keen understanding of the local situation on the ground is particularly impressive. "We were well briefed before we left," explains Captain Fahey "on the history of the area and what happened here. That said, you don't really understand the situation until you're on the ground here. Thankfully we haven't had any problems with the local population. We have excellent NCO's on the ground here in addition, which is a great help."

All personnel here are aware that there can be tensions in this area." Comdt MacEoin says that Irish troops have been involved in operations in the area that have resulted from ethnic tensions. "We were exposed immediately to the difficulties and the hatred which exists between the various communities. The training which we received before deployment here was excellent, but it's the on the ground experience that really makes the difference in ensuring this is a successful mission."



Commandant Larry MacEoin

The day-to-day work for Irish officers in Kosovo is in a large part dictated by directives from KFOR headquarters. An example of this would be the alert status that was heightened from 'A' to 'B' during SIGNAL's visit there. A car-bomb also detonated in Pristina in an attempt to injure or kill a government official, so officers are kept constantly updated on the changing nature of this volatile area. In late November there was a general threat against NATO troops in Kosovo, in addition to consulates, embassies and other soft targets. The threat was believed to originate from Islamic extremists, possible Al Qaeda. "For instance over the last week or so (early December) Pristina has been out of bounds to non-operational traffic. If there is a change in the alert status for example, all our patrols are notified and we make the necessary adjustments to our operations and equipment." Comdt MacEoin says that this is a lower-risk operation than other overseas deployments he has been involved in but says that it is only lower risk due to the fact that KFOR troops are able to stabilise and to an extent pacify areas of extreme bitterness and hatred. "Frequently we're finding weapons caches, unexploded ordnance and grenades. So there is still a certain degree of readiness should the situation here fall apart again. While it's a low-risk mission we have to maintain a very high profile." The profile of the mission means that the troops conduct regular and random patrols of all villages in their area of operations, to monitor for any illegal activity and to reassure the population. The humanitarian aspect of the mission, known as CIMIC, has, in the opinion of the officers, greatly



Captain Lorraine Fahey



Ethnic cleansing: After Albanians returned to the village of Slovinje, they destroyed these Serbian houses.

assisted the troops in identifying with the often-dire needs of the people. "It enhances our standing in the locality," says Capt. Fahey. "It also gives us a reason to talk to people and this can also provide us with other relevant information that would be useful. It can range from raising the issue of road improvements in a village to providing schoolbags for an Askali (gypsy) community to encourage children to attend school."

extremely happy with how things have been going," says Comdt MacEoin, "we've integrated particularly well and I suppose a lot of that is due to the fact that we've spent so long preparing for this mission."

Lieutenant Colonel Vesa Kangasmaki is the overall commander of the FIN/IRL Battlegroup. Speaking in Battlegroup HQ, he says that the Irish involvement in the group's operation has been excellent to

"The possibility of revenge increases the desire."

Captain Fahey is pleased that female Defence Forces personnel in Kosovo are involved in every area of the operation. "There used to be certain restrictions on female personnel in the Lebanon due to local religious reasons. Here it is different and the female members of 'C' Company are involved in everything such as patrols and checkpoints. It's a great opportunity for myself, as it would be for any officer, to be in this position." The performance of the Irish troops in Kosovo to date is a source of great pride to those involved. "We're

date. "We're enjoying the cooperation of the Irish troops here," he says, "we have been planning for this joint Battlegroup for some time, and I think it's been worth it. We have been successful to date. It's not the first time I've enjoyed serving on overseas missions with the Irish. My experience with the Irish Defence Forces goes back 18 years, to Cyprus, and I have many happy memories of working with them. The area which the Irish company patrols is more volatile since it contains a number of Serb villages and enclaves, but thankfully the

Battlegroup has been able to deal with any challenges. I'm very happy with the cooperation so far."

The Irish troops currently serving in Kosovo will finish their deployment in April, and another Irish Infantry Company Group will replace them. The long-term future for Irish involvement with KFOR depends on the downsizing strategy currently being devised. Comdt Kieran Butler believes that the Kosovo deployment is an important one for the Defence Forces. "We are extremely busy here and the mission is proceeding as we would wish it to. Morale levels are high amongst our personnel; everyone is here because they volunteered to be here. It's an important deployment in that we're working with another nation, Finland, and in terms of equipment and resources we're very well established."

The future for Kosovo is highly uncertain. Technically it remains part of Serbia, but that state is an impoverished pariah nation, which is mired in its own political uncertainty. To the south, Albania, a nation close to the hearts of so many Kosovars remains an economic mire, the government in Tirana struggles to maintain control over the land it currently possesses so the likelihood of it successfully incorporating Kosovo into a greater Albania is not even a remote possibility at present. The author of 'Kosovo-War And Revenge', Tim Judah, says that the way in which the Serbs lost control of Kosovo, after a lengthy NATO aerial campaign, means that it is highly unlikely that they will be given an opportunity to repossess it. That said, the KFOR operation is being systematically downsized, even if the US base 'Bondsteel' remains one of the largest American military settlements since Vietnam. Kosovo is also an evocative place in the Serbian mind; In 1389 the Serbs fought a heroic but ultimately futile battle against the Turks. The former Yugoslav dictator Slobadan Milosevic used the monument, which now stands of Kosovo Polje, as the scene of many of his nationalist speeches. In 1989, celebrating the 600th anniversary of the battle, Milosevic told one million Serbs at the battle site; "They will never do this to you again. Never again will anyone defeat you. This speech and the towering monument hold the keys to Yugoslavia's tragedy of the past decade, the obsession with defeat, the myth of the defence of Europe and the obligation of the present to defend the past. Tim Judah uses a comment from Aleksa Djilas, a Serbian commentator and analyst, to neatly frame what may be simmering below the surface in Kosovo; "The possibility of revenge increases the desire."