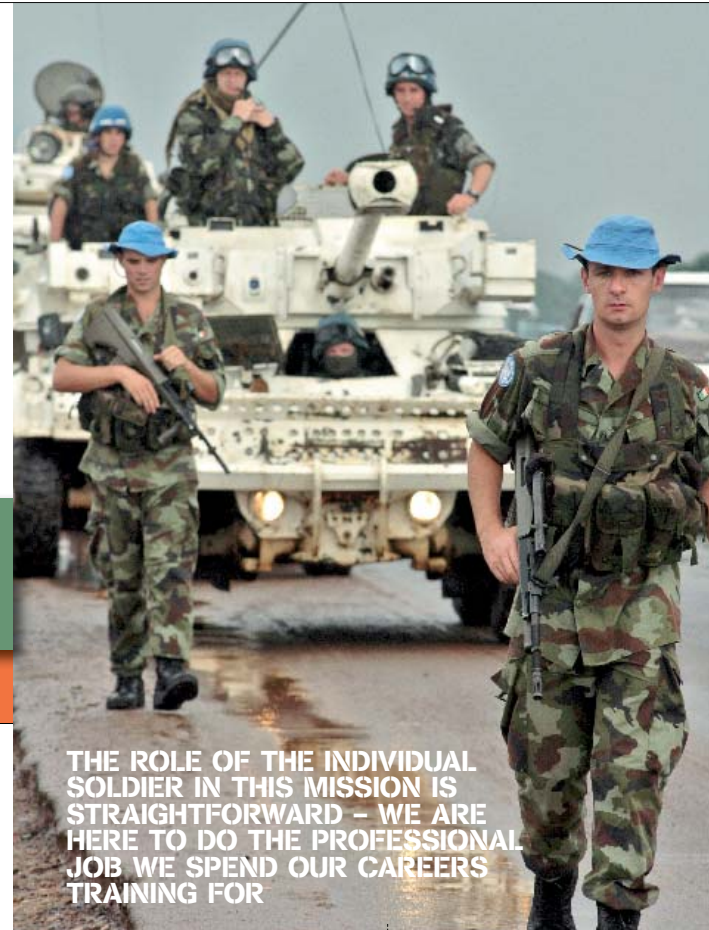




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#### Mission of the FQRF:

FQRF deploys an armoured battalion on peace-support operations in Liberia in order to act as UNMIL force reserve, support UNMIL sector commanders, support the election process and undertake special security taskings as directed by the force commander in accordance with UNSC Resolution 1509 and 1609 (SCSL).



**THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL SOLDIER IN THIS MISSION IS STRAIGHTFORWARD – WE ARE HERE TO DO THE PROFESSIONAL JOB WE SPEND OUR CAREERS TRAINING FOR**

local and international police elements that operate here.

Sector patrols are a short-term operation for the FQRF. The main tools used for this job are the MOWAG Piranha III APC, personal weapon – and a good measure of Irish sociability.

Patrols serve two distinct purposes. Firstly, to show a strong UN presence in the area and also to act as a visible deterrent against potential militia or criminal activity.

Monrovia has a population of approximately one million people. It is the largest centre of ex-combatants in the country and saw some of the fiercest fighting during the civil war years up to 2003. It is recognised that the Irish peacekeeper has a natural, cultural ability to engage with local civilians and it is through this that information and local knowledge are gathered at street level. These patrols give

the battalion an accurate intelligence picture as Irish troops are tasked to find answers to regularly updated information requirements.

The second function of the FQRF is to conduct long-range patrols (LRPs) to all parts of Liberia, including the border areas with Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote D'Ivoire.

These LRPs are in support of UN troops who have a ground-holding responsibility throughout Liberia. The Irish assist them in their respective area of operations through aggressive local patrolling and by easing the security concerns of the local people, hence building local confidence. These LRPs can be deployed by land, sea and air. Air and sea support is provided by UN force assets from other nations. They are always a minimum of company size (110-140 personnel) and the necessary service support elements, such as medics, engineers, maintenance and communications to ensure that the

patrol is self sufficient while deployed. A typical LRP could last anywhere between three to 15 days.

The mobility and speed provided both by UN air elements and organic APCs of the FQRF are important in affording the unit the ability to tackle its third main mission tasking. That is, to provide security to the UN Special Court in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The previous Irish battalion (March to November 2006) was deployed operationally in Sierra Leone for the successful extradition of former Liberian President Charles Taylor under 11 charges of varying crimes which brought war and instability to much of western Africa in the 1990s. He now awaits trial in The Hague, in Holland, under the auspices of the UN Special Court of Sierra Leone. The court moved venue because of the potential security risk involved, and the operation to extract Charles Taylor was seen as the final opportunity for guerrilla forces loyal to him to launch an attack and prevent both his trial and extradition. His successful extradition and the facilitating of the onward transportation by the FQRF significantly reduced the chances of Liberia returning to conflict.

The role of the individual soldier in this mission is straightforward – we are here to do the professional job that we spend our careers training for – to soldier in an operational environment. With the ever-changing geopolitical climate of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, overseas service is long established as a regular part of military life for the Irish soldier.

Irish Defence Forces first contributed to peacekeeping in 1960 in Congo (also the UN's first peacekeeping mission) and our peacekeeping service has been continuous ever since. Our most notable mission was a 23-year contribution to the UN force in Lebanon from 1978 to 2001, to which we contributed more than 32,000 individual tours of duty. Forty-seven of our colleagues gave their lives on that mission. In October 2006 we returned to Lebanon following the conflict in July/August. This brings the Irish Defence Forces' current contribution to more than 830 troops currently serving overseas in 21 separate crisis-maintenance operations in 19 countries. Our other sizeable contributions are to Kosovo (KFOR) and Bosnia (EUFOR).

How do the sights, smells and sounds of a foreign country such as Liberia affect the young Irish soldier? For a fair portion of the 96<sup>th</sup> Irish Battalion, this is their first overseas tour. At home, mission preparation and training, allied with double checks of personal gear and last-minute personal and financial arrangements were the norm.

To say that Liberia is a change from the lush green fields of modern, urbanising Ireland is a huge understatement. Liberia

# THE VANGUARD

The Irish Defence Forces make up the main body of the Force Quick Reaction Force (FQRF) of the United Nations' Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). The current six-month rotation of the 330-strong, 96<sup>th</sup> Irish Infantry Battalion is drawn from the 4<sup>th</sup> Western Brigade, in the west of Ireland.

## IRELAND'S QUICK REACTION FORCE IN LIBERIA

BY CAPTAIN EÓIN MCGEENEY / IRISH DEFENCE FORCES

Unlike many Australian units on peacekeeping missions, this is an ad-hoc unit made up of troops from combat, combat support and combat service support units in Ireland. It is this flexible, highly skilled make-up that gives the Irish much needed independence in conducting operations throughout Liberia. Camp Clara, home of the Irish contingent, is situated in Monrovia on the grounds of the once-famed Hotel Africa. The hotel, like the country, has seen better times. The main building is little more than a burnt-out shell, while its chalets are in a much better state after receiving attention from Irish engineers. Camp Clara is a little part of Ireland overseas where, outside of operational commitments, "ceol agus craic" abound. This has been home to Irish troops since our first deployment here in November 2003.

Camp Clara is also home to the incoming Pakistani element of UNMIL's FQRF. They have recently taken over from Swedish counterparts who have withdrawn from the mission. The 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Pakistani Frontier Force will take over operations as the FQRF in entirety by May 2007 when Irish involvement will cease.

Liberia is an extremely poor country with large mineral resources. Much of this

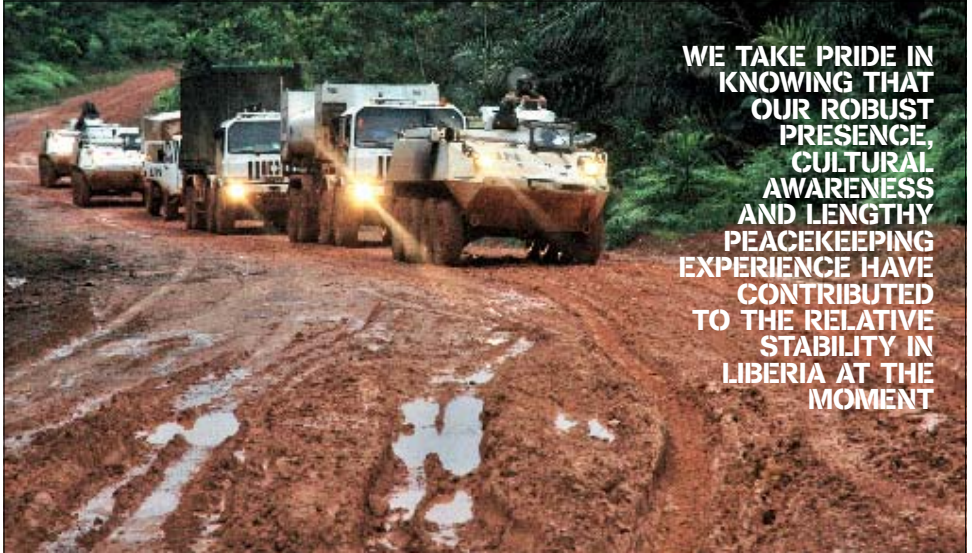
inherent wealth was misused to procure arms and fund conflicts within and across its borders – hence the UN involvement. Currently, UN sanctions prevent the mining and selling of diamonds while earlier sanctions on the export of timber have been lifted.

Liberia's main exports include rubber and timber. The Government of Liberia has recently regulated these industries and controlled trade is commencing. They do this with UNMIL assistance.

The mission of the Irish contingent means that the FQRF are prepared to deploy at one-hour's notice to move to any location in Liberia by sea, air or road, acting as the main asset to the force commander. He may deploy our unit against any escalating situation in the country that demands a robust, mobile, mechanised element to contain or suppress a situation. The tasks for Irish soldiers on the ground are relatively straightforward and are broken down into three main operational functions.

The first are platoon-strength, mobile and foot patrols within Monrovia – Liberia's capital city – and are conducted within a designated sector of the city and surrounding areas. Criminal activity is a concern and these patrols are designed as a proactive deterrent. They support the





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is an extremely poor country that has been embroiled in conflict for a long time and the effect on the population and infrastructure will be felt for many years to come. The country, its lack of infrastructure and its extreme climate would surely remind Australian servicemen of their worthy contribution in East Timor – a mission the Irish Defence Forces also made a small contribution to. It was here that our first operational deployment of Irish special forces – Army Ranger Wing – took place. This was followed by a more robust and mobile, but limited deployment of an element of the same unit to Liberia in November 2003 to February 2004. We take pride in knowing that our robust presence, professionalism, cultural awareness and lengthy peacekeeping experience have contributed to the relative stability in Liberia at the moment.

Christmas for the young soldier away from home can be a challenging time. Through the efforts of the battalion chaplain and the civilian and military cooperation (CIMIC) committee, some energy was channelled into worthy causes. Money was raised through the production and sale of specially designed Christmas cards. Funds raised were available to purchase food and Christmas gifts for some of the poorest families and children of Monrovia. Shortly, 19 containers are due to arrive from Ireland with a variety of essential items and gifts to be distributed all over the country. This effort will be largely powered by the work of battalion personnel.

Christmas Day started in good military fashion with a 10km road race and finished with all Irish troops attending a dinner hosted by the battalion commander, which saw a traditional

menu with an Irish touch served up. Later, it was time to contact family and friends, who support us back home, with our Christmas wishes.

As 2007 dawns, the battalion will have more LRPs to conduct across Liberia as well as the daily sector patrols in Monrovia and an operational deployment to the Special Court in Sierra Leone. Importantly too, leave rotations begin in January, allowing each soldier a three-week break at home.

The lengthy preparation in our home form-up phase and the physical discomfort of our intense Mission Readiness Exercise (MRE) are worth it, when we realise that the people we encounter in towns, villages, schools and roadsides on our patrols have a chance in life to avoid the fate of the child soldiers associated with many parts of western Africa.

This year will see the end of Irish involvement with UNMIL after three-and-a-half years, as command is formally handed over to the Pakistani battalion in May.

Operational and logistical experiences gained in Liberia have been very important for all ranks of the Irish battalion and have given us continued opportunity to test and challenge ourselves. Naturally, this experience feeds into our training at home and gives valuable insight to leaders and soldiers alike. It is this experience, adaptability and professionalism that we can readily bring to the table for any future overseas missions.

\* *Ceol agus craic* = music and fun – in the truly Irish sense.

