

Camaraderie Through Service: The Importance of ARCO Today

Brigadier General Paul Pakenham (Ret'd), on behalf of the Executive Committee, writes for SIGNAL on the increasing relevance of the Association of Retired Commissioned Officers (ARCO) in light of the continuing evolution of careers for Officers in the Defence Forces.



ARCO's relevance to retiring officers in 2020, is somewhat different than in June 1994, when the Association was formally launched. In recent years, we have observed a significant change in the retirement profile of commissioned officers, with a movement towards early retirement, and, in some cases, retirement without pensions.

The purpose of this article is to convince, not only those officers who retire on age grounds, but especially those transitioning to civilian employment, that membership of ARCO enables them to promote their interests and needs, to retain the capacity to advocate for the Defence Forces and the families of serving and retired personnel, and to participate in a range of activities such as business networking opportunities.

Last July, we successfully hosted a Workshop in The Military College, titled *ARCO's Future Relevance in the Evolving Environment*.

Comprehensive presentations were provided by ARCO's General Secretary Comdt Conor King and by Capt Paul Conlon SO COMO. Wide ranging contributions were made by all attendees, including serving officers Lt Col Derek Priestley and Capt Deirdre Carbery, and retired officers Lt Col Pat Ryan (Retd), Comdt Ciara Prendergast (Retd), Comdt Cathal Berry (Retd) and Lt Niall Mc Carthy NS (Retd).

ARCO's proposed Aim and revised Objectives were stress-tested during the Workshop, and were later formally adopted at the 2019 AGM.



Lt Col Richard Cummins (Retd) presenting An Claidheamh Gasciochta to 2/Lt Oisín Murtagh in 2017. Photo courtesy of AC Press Officer



Brigadier Gen (Ret'd) Paul Pakenham of ARCO alongside Michael McDowell at ARCO's 25th anniversary event.

The Workshop's conclusions continue to inform the further advancement of ARCO relevance and outreach programme. These conclusions include:

- An acknowledgment of ARCO's legacy, historical successes and outputs, and
- An understanding of the need to be relevant to retirees of all categories and genders.

Point of Departure

Operating on a voluntary basis since 1994, and with three decades of steadfast service to the Defence Community, our membership sees ARCO as a vibrant, inclusive, diverse, mutually supportive, evolving and flourishing Representative Association, recognised by both the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces.

As a distinctive group of retired officers, ARCO encourages and fosters the unique fellowship and comradeship, which derives not only from our extensive military service in Óglaigh na hÉireann, but also stems from our membership of RACO as serving officers.

Similar to RACO, we provide a strong, collective and authoritative voice, representing and supporting Permanent Defence Force officers who retire or who transition to civilian life, and eligible spouses or civil partners.

Our membership is identified as a valuable asset in enhancing the credibility, influence and integrity of the Association. When officers retire from the Permanent Defence Force, we see a natural membership transition from RACO to ARCO, retaining an affiliation with the Defence Community and transferring a range of knowledge and experiences. For example, Col Con McNamara (Retd) and Lt Col Michael Baston, former RACO Presidents, actively serve on ARCO's Executive Committee, representing the Curragh and Southern regions respectively.

Posture

Readers of SIGNAL will be interested to note that our Objectives have been substantially revised, and, as already stated, were formally adopted during our 2019 AGM.

Building on our ethos, values and accomplishments, and with a willingness to change, ARCO is now fully committed to being a more diverse and inclusive organisation, and intends to remain representative, relevant, and viable, in order to safeguard our future.

Of the 21 associations catering for retired public servants, ARCO is the only one with formal access to a member of Government. ARCO values this unique position, and actively engages with the Minister of Defence, which includes formal meetings on an annual basis.

In addition to formal meetings with the Chief of Staff, ARCO has benefitted from a mutually supportive interface with all members of the General Staff, the GOCs and FOCNS. ARCO, ONE and IUNVA hold quarterly meetings with officials from the Department of Defence and officers from Defence Forces Headquarters. As is generally known throughout the Defence Community, ARCO remains fully engaged with ONE, IUNVA, RACO and PDFORRA.

Of significant relevance to serving and retired officers, we are represented on the Executive Committee of the Defence Forces Benevolent Fund, on CAOGA's Board of Management, and on the Council of the Alliance of Retired Public Servants. In areas of mutual interest, we also interface with the Irish Defence Forces Officers Club (IDFOC).

ARCO has promoted the absolute requirement to articulate and institutionalise an inclusive and comprehensive Government Veterans' Policy. In the interim, we are actively advancing the Combined Veteran's Strategy, collectively submitted by ARCO, ONE and IUNVA. This Strategy includes the establishment of a Joint Office for Veterans' Affairs, consisting of personnel drawn from the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces.

Pensions

Pensions, and pension related issues, remain a major focus of our endeavours, which are informed by the Association's Pension Strategy.

The value of our members' military pensions into the future is dependent on the successful implementation of this strategy, which is available on our website <https://iarco.info/>

Members of RACO will wish to note that ARCO's Pension Strategy focuses on:

- The restoration of FEMPI pension reductions,
- Pension parity,
- The value of military pensions which must be maintained into the future,
- The establishment of a statutory, independent third-party mechanism for the negotiation of public service pensions,
- Repealing abatement anomalies.

Within our competencies, we continue to provide advice to retired officers employed in the public sector on issues associated with pension abatement.

Since October 2019, we are actively engaged with the Department of Defence and the Department of Expenditure and Reform, on the application of the increase in MSA to military pensions in payment on 03 July, 2019.

Analysis - Debate - Action

We provide a valuable forum for analysis and debate, which enables the Association to address a range of issues that impinge on the interests and quality of lives of retired officers, including those who have transitioned to civilian employment, and eligible spouses or civil partners.

For example, prior to the enactment of the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012, ARCO successfully lobbied Ministers, politicians and Government Departments, which resulted in the protection of military pensions of retired officers already employed in the public service.

Recently, we have achieved reasonable success in raising awareness of some problems associated with the Registration of Foreign Births and Deaths arising from overseas service, and the interpretation of the Contributory Pension Schemes for Spouses and Children (Revised Pension Scheme 1985). We have provided appropriate advice to dependent spouses who were identified as falling outside of the remit of the Revised Pension Scheme 1985, including advice on the appeal process. For its part, ARCO remains engaged in ensuring that appropriate legislation is enacted regarding the Registration of Foreign Births and Deaths.

Networking

Networking is a new direction for ARCO, providing communications means to a wider audience.

One of our revised objectives facilitates mutual support, networking opportunities and social occasions, for both retired officers and for those who remain active in the workplace, thus maintaining a fruitful bond with colleagues, in sharing talents and interests for their common benefit.



Capt Odhran Murphy (Retd), Photo courtesy of Capt Murphy (Retd)



Capt Anne Brogan (Retd) CHCI / Irish Coast Guard, Photo courtesy of Capt Brogan (Retd)



ARCO's Networking Team: Capt Paul Amoroso (Retd) and Capt Phil Quinlan (Retd)

Of significant interest to our younger membership cohort and to serving officers, we are examining the provision of networking opportunities for both our members and the wider Defence Community, with due cognizance to geographical and timing parameters.

Under the leadership of the Representative of the Eastern Region, Capt Phil Quinlan (Retd) supported by Capt Paul Amoroso (Retd), ARCO will be organising events based on relevant defence, security, leadership and management themes. These networking events will provide our members with opportunities for connecting, for sharing knowledge, and for cultivating business and social relationships.

Whereas our inaugural networking event was deferred on account of the pandemic, assuming that social distancing restrictions are eased, it is likely that the theme of our first panel discussion event in quarter 4 of 2020, could focus on the economic, political and security implications of Covid-19.

The first event will be a golden opportunity for ARCO to communicate to a new cohort of retired officers why the organisation has relevance, what role we can play, and what real impact we can have for retired officers and the defence and security of the State.

ARCO's social media platforms such as LinkedIn also provide a valuable means of networking for those members with common professional interests, and increasing their awareness of trends in the marketplace, and in the wider Defence and Security domain.

Advocate for the Defence Forces

As retired commissioned officers, in solidarity with serving personnel and their respective families, and acknowledging the endeavours of the General Staff along with RACO and PDFORRA, in the recent past, ARCO released three Statements of Concern.

The statements derived from the deterioration of service conditions, and the depletion of strategic defence capabilities arising from early retirements.

The statements reflected the views of our members and are posted on our website: <https://iarco.info/>

Following the publication of the Public Sector Pay Commission's Report, ARCO called on the Minister for Defence to present formal proposals to Government establishing without delay, a statutory based, permanent and independent Defence Forces Commission, in order to address remuneration (including pensions), service and retention conditions, and the conciliation and arbitration architecture.

ARCO welcomes the publication of the Government's High-Level Implementation Plan Strengthening the Defence Forces. Nevertheless, ARCO understands that 8 of the 15 projects are behind schedule. Whereas some of the Implementation Plan's projects are completed, e.g. increase in MSA, restoration of allowances, and the restoration of the pilot service commitment scheme, we remain concerned with the high turnover rate of 10% in 2019, with the alarming strength on 30 April of 8,485, and with the limited progress in addressing key areas such as recruitment processes, review of pay structures, and non-pay retention issues.

Likewise, we continue to take every opportunity to highlight the deteriorating living and welfare standards endured by families of serving personnel, dependent spouses and children, and, in some cases, retired single personnel.

This assessment was reinforced by ARCO's members providing social and material support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lobbying and Submissions

In the prevailing environment, we maintain a pro-active involvement with kindred organisations and agencies, and we



Lt Col Mark Prendergast (Retd). Photograph courtesy of Prendergast Leadership



Capt Paul Amoroso (Retd), as IED Threat Mitigation Advisor with UNSOS in Somalia, briefing US AFRICOM Military Attachés at a conference in Uganda.

continue to engage in public advocacy and appropriate lobbying, on pertinent issues relative to the Association’s objectives.

Our membership reflects a considerable reservoir of experience and expertise within the realm of Defence. Consequently, ARCO is very well positioned to contribute to discussions on Defence related issues,

As such, we have made wide-ranging submissions on the White Paper on Defence, the White Paper on Foreign Policy and External Relations, and recently on the National Security Strategy.

Regarding pension related issues, serving and retired personnel may wish to recall that we have made comprehensive submissions to the Public Service Pay Commission, the Department of Defence, and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Elections to the Oireachtas, provide ARCO with ample opportunities to inform election candidates of the absolute need to promote the needs of retired officers, and eligible spouses or civil partners, and to advocate for the Defence Forces, including its personnel, its veterans, and the families of serving and retired personnel.

As a former Defence Forces colleague, and as a member of ARCO, we welcomed Dr Cathal Berry’s decision to put himself before the electorate in February. In solidarity with serving and retired personnel, coupled with their respective families, our membership actively supported Cathal’s candidacy as an Independent candidate for Dáil Éireann, and subsequently congratulated him on his election as a TD for Kildare South.

Lobbying by Alliance of Retired Public Servants

Established in 2013, the main objective of the Alliance of Retired Public Servants is to protect and advance the interests of public service pensioners, including ARCO members, by representing

the collective views of such pensioners, to the Government and other relevant bodies.

The Alliance, which now has in the region of 148,000 affiliated members, from 21 Associations, is recognised by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Congress of Trade Unions.

The Alliance’s outputs include meetings with Government Ministers, Politicians, Political Parties, Government Departments, and Public Service Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and submissions to An Taoiseach, the Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Public Service Pay Commission.

In advancing pension related issues on behalf of its membership, ARCO is a proactive member of the Alliance, and, as already stated is formally represented on its Council.

Mentoring and Coaching

According to the Defence Forces leadership doctrine, leaders provide knowledge and feedback through counselling, coaching and mentoring.

Harnessing our members’ diverse skillsets, energy and vast range of expertise and experiences, derived from military service both at home and overseas, we hope to engage in supporting the Defence Forces mentoring and coaching programmes. This will involve the current generation of officers who are the future generation of ARCO’s membership.

We envisage that such engagement will reciprocate investment and experiences accruing from military service both at home and overseas, reinforce ARCO’s motto, enhance our outreach programme with serving officers, and provide objective perspectives beyond the scope of the chain of command relationship.

Future

Finally, in these challenging times, whilst advancing the Association’s relevance with its evolving membership cohort, ARCO’s focus for the short to medium term, is to

- Protect our legacy, ethos and values,
- Implement our revised objectives as adopted at the 2019 AGM,
- Develop our members’ networking capacity,
- Expand our membership base,
- Engagement in Defence Forces mentoring and coaching programmes,
- Advocate for the Defence Forces, including its personnel, its veterans, and the families of serving and retired personnel, and
- Prepare a framework for the elaboration of a Veterans’ Policy.

For further information, please visit ARCO’s Website: <https://iarco.info/> and follow us on LinkedIn under Association of Retired Commissioned Officers, or on Facebook and Twitter, via @ARCOIreland.



Capt Anne Brogan (Retd) CHCI / Irish Coast Guard, Photo courtesy of Capt Brogan (Retd)



Lt Niall McCarthy (NS) (Retd), Watch Officer ICG MRCC Dublin, Photo courtesy of Lt McCarthy (NS)



ARCO's 25th Anniversary Reception, courtesy of Col Declan Carbery



Comdt (Ret'd) Cathal Berry TD. Photograph courtesy of D6il Eireann



Comdt Miriam McCann (Ret'd), IT Manager Aviva Stadium. Photograph courtesy of Comdt McCann