

“In the service of peace”

Remembering Col Justin MacCarthy DSM (1914 – 1960)

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In July 1960 Belgium granted independence to the Congo its former colony and the country erupted in widespread violence. International concern resulted in the involvement of the United Nations, which established a peacekeeping force designated UNOC (United Nations Operation in the Congo) to maintain public order. The Irish Government responded very promptly and positively to a request from the United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold to participate in the new peacekeeping mission and agreed to provide an infantry battalion for the Congo. The initial request was followed very quickly by a further request for a second battalion which was also acceded to by Government. The Congo mission would become the country's third UN military mission and historically the first occasion when armed Defence Forces units were deployed on overseas duty. Preceding UNOC, Ireland's contribution to UN operations was in the form of unarmed military observers first with UNOGIL (United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon) in June 1958 and subsequently with UNTSO (United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation) in December 1958. Col Justin MacCarthy was about to become the Defence Forces' link to all three missions.

Lt Col MacCarthy (6th Cadet Class), a graduate of the Camberley Command & Staff Course, with previous service in a range of command, staff and instructional appointments, had been selected to lead the Irish contribution to UNOGIL. On arrival in Lebanon his duty station became HQ UNOGIL in Beirut, where within five weeks of his arrival he was promoted to Colonel following a request to the Irish national authorities by Gen Odd Bull (Norway) who led the UNOGIL mission. When UNOGIL was withdrawn in December 1958 the Government was once again requested to provide two officers, Col Justin MacCarthy and Capt Pat Jordan, for UNTSO (United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation), established in 1949 to monitor the contentious demarcation line between Israel and the adjacent Arab states.

The Congo Crisis of 1960, and the UN's decision to establish UNOC, had important implications for the UNTSO mission when the Head of UNTSO, Maj Gen Von Horn (Sweden) was designated the “Supreme Commander” for the armed peacekeeping mission in the

Congo. On assuming his appointment Von Horn requested the involvement of Col MacCarthy to assist with establishing HQ UNOC in Leopoldville. Thereafter as the Defence Forces focused on selecting, preparing and deploying the 32nd & 33rd Battalions to UNOC, unnoticed, Col Justin MacCarthy was also *en route* from the Middle East to the Republic of the Congo.

Col MacCarthy already had two years' service with the UN in the Middle East. On his appointment to UNTSO, given that this mission allowed for observers to be accompanied, he had arranged for his wife Eileen and young son Justin to join him. Having done so early in 1959 the family lived initially in Jerusalem and later in Beirut. Col MacCarthy's role with UNTSO was expanded by Von Horn to include that of Chairman of the Mixed (Israeli, Egyptian) Armistice Commission in Gaza, troubleshooting problems between UN agencies (UNEF, UNTSO) and Israeli and Egyptian armed forces. From Gaza he redeployed at very short notice to Leopoldville, to undertake duties as Von Horn's Deputy Chief of Staff & Chief Operations Officer in the HQ of the fledgling UN peacekeeping operation in the Congo. By joining this mission Col MacCarthy became the first Defence Forces officer to serve with and hold senior staff appointments in three consecutive UN missions.

Those first months of UNOC presented major problems for HQ UNOC staff and all troop contributors as this large force adjusted to a very challenging environment and the demanding operational tempo of a hastily assembled, overstretched, diverse UN force struggling with a complex mandate. From the Irish perspective a "can do" attitude prevailed in the Irish area of operations as the 32nd & 33rd Battalions sought to "keep the peace" and come to terms with difficulties of culture, language, climate and infrastructure. Tragically on 3 October Ireland had its first fatal casualty when CS Felix Grant (B Coy 33 Bn) died following an operation for appendicitis. His remains were repatriated on 21 October for burial in Clonmel on 26 October. This tragedy was compounded a little over three weeks later on night of 27 / 28 October 1960 when Col MacCarthy was killed in a car accident in Leopoldville. He was the first Defence Force officer fatality of the UNOC mission and to date the most senior officer casualty on overseas duty.

This devastating news of Col MacCarthy's death was communicated by UN authorities to the family in Beirut by telegram delivered by the Hon Irish Consul Mr Cochrane. Mrs MacCarthy with her 8-year-old son mourned alone, far from home, without support and forced by circumstances to rely heavily on her friends from the international community. The tragedy

of her situation and circumstances was compounded by the uncertainty regarding the possibility of a local burial in Leopoldville or the return of Col MacCarthy's remains to Ireland. Following early resolution of the funeral arrangements by UN authorities the remains were repatriated by sea to Ireland. Throughout this journey two Irish officers from HQ UNOC (Lt Col F Lee and Lt P McNally) accompanied the remains on a long tortuous route to Dublin via Tenerife, Antwerp and Cork.

Meantime, Col MacCarthy's wife and son undertook an equally long journey by sea from Beirut to Marseille, train to Paris, flight to London and eventually to Dublin. The funeral was conducted with full military honours in Arbour Hill church and at the subsequent burial in Glasnevin Cemetery. On the 14 December 1960 six weeks after his death, Col MacCarthy was finally laid to rest alongside the Niamba casualties, killed in action ten days after his death. The Niamba tragedy of early November had shocked the Nation and in a very personal heart rendering sense brought grief to a large number of other dependants. These deaths were the unexpected and enduring cruel cost to be borne very privately by those for whom their "peacekeeper" did not return home.

Like many others who experience the grief of the loss of a peacekeeper on duty overseas, Mrs MacCarthy was forced to pick up the pieces and face the challenge of raising her young son on her own. In early 1961, courtesy of her UN friends from her time in Beirut, she was offered employment with UNHCR in Geneva and moved there for five years with her son. In late 1966 they moved to London where she worked for a member of the House of Lords and finally returned to the family home in Dublin a year later. She continued to do contract work for UNO and travelled frequently to Geneva & also to the USA. Over the years she kept in contact with her UN friends and enjoyed visiting them. She died just short of her 90th birthday in 1999. Her son Justin having attended school in Jerusalem, Beirut, Geneva, London, Dublin, graduated from Trinity College Dublin, and practiced as a solicitor. He is now retired and a frequent contributor to the RTE radio programme "Sunday Miscellany", where he occasionally shares his boyhood memories of travel across the disputed frontiers and troubled lands of the Middle East.