

60th Anniversary: Lieutenant-General Seán McKeown DSM, Force Commander ONUC
By Colonel George Kerton (Retd)



12 December 1961, Lieutenant-General McKeown with Dr Sture C Linner, Officer in Charge of ONUC, Justin Bomboko, Congolese Minister for Foreign Affairs and Chief of Staff of the Armie Nationale Congolaise, General Joseph Mobutu at Ndjili airport waiting for the arrival of UN Under Secretary Ralph Bunche.¹

On 07 January 1961, the Defence Forces Chief of Staff, Lt Gen Sean McKeown was appointed Force Commander of the United Nations Operation in the Republic of the Congo: Opération des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC).

Previously as Chief of Staff, on 17 July 1960, Maj Gen McKeown recommended that a UN request for an Irish battalion be accepted. In the aftermath of the Niemba ambush which took place on 08 November, Maj Gen McKeown visited the 32 and 33 Infantry Battalions deployed in the Congo.



Left: 1 May 1961. Lieutenant-General McKeown inspecting the 5th Queen's Own Nigerian Regiment at Bukavu, Kivu Province. ADC to the FC, Capt Tadgh O'Neill (COS 1986 – 1989) is seen in the rear wearing sunglasses.

Right: 13 September 1961. Lieutenant-General McKeown and Dr Sture Linner Officer-In-Charge ONUC are standing beside UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld at Njili Airport as he meets officers of the Indian contingent.

¹ ONUC photographs courtesy of UN multimedia website

On 15 December 1960, following a request from the UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, the Irish cabinet agreed to Maj Gen McKeown's nomination as Force Commander.² His appointment was confirmed by the United Nations on 22 December. He was subsequently promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-General and took over as Force Commander from Gen Carl von Horn.



Left: 13 September 1961. UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld arriving at Njili Airport, near Leopoldville he was greeted by the Congolese Prime Minister, Cyrille Adoula and Chief of Staff of the Armie Nationale Congolaise, General Joseph-Desiré Mobutu, they are on his right. Lieutenant-General McKeown is behind and to the left. Mr Hammarskjöld was killed in a plane crash on 18 September 1961 while travelling to Ndola airport in northern Rhodesia for talks with the Katangan leader Moise Tshombé.

Right: 16 November 1961. A sitting of the Security Council to hear statements on the Congo. Lieutenant-General McKeown is sitting behind U Thant, Acting Secretary-General of the UN and Valerian A Zorin (USSR) President of the Security Council. Ralph J Bunche, Under Secretary for Special Political Affairs is to General McKeown's left. In the back row are: Brigadier Indarjit Rikhye (India) Military Adviser to the Secretary General and Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, UN Representative in Elisabethville.

Commanding a UN force of 19,828 personnel, Lt Gen Seán McKeown established the Katanga Command, and served during Operation Rumpunch, Operation Morthor and Operation UNOKAT. His term as ONUC Force Commander coincided with the heaviest fighting in Katanga, including Elizabethville, Kamina, and Jadotville, during the months of September and December 1961.



Left: 1 June 1961. Lieutenant-General McKeown addressing a press conference on security arrangements for the convening of the national Congolese parliament at Lovanium University in

² Ireland, the United Nations and the Congo by Michael Kennedy and Art Magennis, Four Courts Press, 2014



Leopoldville. General McKeown is in the centre, Dr Sture Linner, Officer-In-Charge ONUC (with spectacles and holding pipe) is on his left.

Right: 3 October 1961. Four F-86 Sabre jet fighters of the Imperial Ethiopian Air Force arrived at Njili Airport, Leopoldville. Lieutenant General McKeown viewed the aircraft with Major General Mangasha Iyassu, Senior ONUC Military Advisor to the Congolese Central Government and Major-General Gabre-Leul Yacob, Deputy Force Commander and Major Assefa, Ethiopian Squadron Commander.

Distinguished Service Medal

On 18 February 1964, a medal to be known as “An Bonn Seirbhíse Dearsca” or, in English, “The Distinguished Service Medal”, was introduced by the Defence Forces. The medal may be awarded to officers, non-commissioned officers and privates of the Defence Forces, and to members of the Army Nursing and Chaplaincy Services in recognition of individual or associated acts of bravery, courage, leadership, resource or devotion to duty (other than any such acts or duty performed on war service) arising out of, or associated with, service in the Defence Forces and not meriting the award of An Bonn Míleata Calmachta.

In 1967, Lt Gen Seán McKeown was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal with Honour, the citation reads:

The Distinguished Service Medal With Honour

0.4427 Lieutenant-General John McKeown

For distinguished service as Commander, United Nations Force in the Republic of the Congo, from January 1961 to March 1962. Lieutenant-General McKeown commanded some 20,000 troops in the cause of peace. In an operation over a vast area with limited communications and varied circumstances, his task demanded leadership and moral and physical courage of a high order. By displaying these qualities in an outstanding manner throughout his term of office, he, in the words of the Secretary General, United Nations ‘discharged his responsibilities with eminence’.



Cooley Peninsula

Lieutenant-General Sean McKeown DSM (Seán MacEoin) was born at Castletown in the Cooley Peninsula, County Louth on 03 June 1910. He was a son of Thomas McKeown and his wife Catherine (née McGinn). He attended Mullaghbuoy National School and CBS Dundalk.

Early Career³



As a member of the 3 Cadet Class, Seán McKeown enlisted in the Defence Forces in February 1930. Commissioned on 08 September 1931, 2/Lt McKeown was appointed to the Infantry Corps, and posted to the 3 Infantry Battalion (The Bloods). From 01 December 1931, he served with the 1 Infantry Battalion, in Galway. Promoted to Lieutenant in November 1937, Lt McKeown returned to 3 Infantry Battalion in October 1939.

12 Infantry Battalion and Military College

On promotion to the rank of Captain on 19 July, 1940, Captain McKeown was appointed Company Commander with the 12 Infantry Battalion. In May 1941, he assumed command of the battalion, was promoted to the rank of Acting Commandant on 20 June, 1941, and subsequently to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel on 29 January 1943. During the Emergency, the 12 Infantry Battalion won the Infantry Cup in 1944. Lt Col McKeown transferred from the 12 Infantry Battalion to The Military College, and was appointed Commandant of the Cadet School on 01 March 1946.

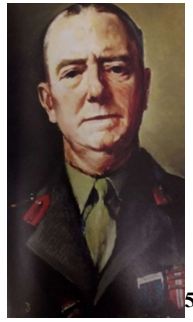
Graduating from the UK's Camberley Staff College in December 1947, Lt Col McKeown was posted to the Infantry School in The Military College. Having served in HQ Western Command as OIC Training and Operations Staff, Lt Col McKeown was appointed as OC 1 Western Battalion on 05 April 1956.

In April 1957, Lt Col McKeown returned to The Military College as an instructor in the Command and Staff School. Promoted in December 1957, Col McKeown was appointed as Commandant of The Military College.

³ Sources for service particulars include *Chiefs of Staff - The Portrait Collection of the Irish Defence Forces* edited by Col Tom Hodson (Retd) for McKee Officers Club. The History Press Ireland, 2011

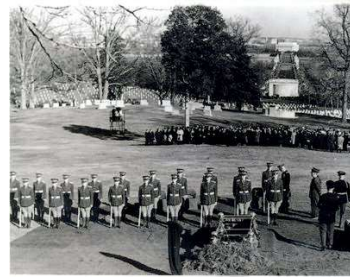
⁴ Photograph courtesy of Military Archives

Chief of Staff & ONUC



In January 1960, he was promoted to the rank of Major-General and, on the advice of the Government was appointed by an tUachtarán, President Éamon de Valera as Chief of Staff. Maj Gen Seán McKeown was the first graduate of the Cadet School to fill the highest appointment in Óglaigh na hÉireann.

In January 1961, promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-General, he was appointed Force Commander of the United Nations Operation in the Congo [Opération des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC)].



Returning to Ireland in March 1962, Lt Gen Seán McKeown completed a second term as Chief of Staff. In November 1963, he represented the Defence Forces at the funeral of President John F. Kennedy. Lt Gen McKeown attended the Oslo UN peacekeeping seminar in January 1964. In November 1965, he was appointed as co-chairman of the UN survey team in Gaza. He carried out an official visit of West German military bases in November 1969. He retired from the Defence Forces in March 1971.

In April 1938, he married Maureen Patricia Carney from Castlebar; they had three sons and one daughter.

On 30 July, 1998 Lieutenant-General Seán McKeown DSM died peacefully at his home in Dublin.

⁵ Photograph of a portrait of Lt Gen McKeown displayed in the DFHQ Officers' Mess, and included in *Chiefs of Staff The Portrait Collection of the Irish Defence Forces* edited by Col Tom Hodson (Retd) for McKee Officers Club, Irish History Press Ireland, 2011

⁶ Photographs courtesy of Military Archives

Defence Forces in ONUC



From 28 July 1960 to 11 May 1964, twelve Defence Forces units and a total of 6,191 individual tours of duty, served with Opération des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC). One Military Medal for Gallantry (MMG), and sixty-five Distinguished Service Medals (DSM) were awarded to Óglaigh na hÉireann personnel who served with ONUC.

Twenty-six members of the Defence Forces died while serving with ONUC. Of the thirty troop-contributing countries, Ireland had the fourth highest number of fatalities after Ghana (49 deaths), India (39) and Ethiopia (28). Of the twenty-six Defence Forces fatalities, sixteen died as a result of hostile action, seven died in accidents, and three died from natural causes.

135 of the 234 ONUC deaths were as a result of “malicious acts” as designated by the United Nations i.e. by hostile action. ONUC personnel were killed in attacks by tribal elements, by the National Congolese Army - Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC), or in operations against the mercenary-led Katanga Gendarmerie.



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