

2010-01-01

Women On The Frontline Across Irish Defence Forces

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Recommended Citation

Clonan, T., 2010: Women On Frontline Across Irish Defence Forces, Dublin: The Irish Times.

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Irish Army Women

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the enlistment of women to the Irish Defence Forces. Whilst Irish women fought in the 1916 Rising and were combatants in the War of Independence and Civil War, they were largely excluded from the newly formed Free State Army of the 1920s. Dr. Bridget Lyons Thornton was an exception to this rule and was commissioned as an officer at the rank of Lieutenant in 1923. She was demobilised in 1924, and aside from the Army's Nursing Service, the Defence Forces were to remain an all-male preserve for almost sixty years.

The 'men-only' status of the Irish Defence Forces – which was largely out of step with international military and paramilitary trends in the 1970s – came under increasing scrutiny from the Irish government as the equality agenda took root in wider Irish society during this decade. By 1979, the Defence Amendment Act (No. 2) of 1979, titled 'An Act to provide for the enlistment of women into the Defence Forces' was passed.

The first cohort of female officer cadets entered the Defence Forces in March 1980. For these women, entering the all-male environment of the Irish Army was something of a culture shock. Initially, there was strong resistance to the concept of female soldiers from within the Defence establishment itself. In a 1978 memo, the Secretary General of the Department of Defence informed the Chief of Staff that female soldiers would simply 'release male soldiers from certain duties in order that (men) fill more active military functions'. To this end, Irish women soldiers were to be confined to 'clerical duties' and the 'driving of light vehicles'.

It was not intended at this point that women would be fully integrated as combat troops into the Defence Forces. Furthermore, the military authorities, in a confidential 1978 report on the enlistment of women to the Defence Forces stated that, 'the basic pay of members of the Women's Service Corps should be less than those payable to men'. The then military authorities also frowned upon pregnancy and stated in paragraph 3 of the same report, 'We are aware that pregnancy is not a ground for termination of service in the Ban Garda (sic) and the public service generally. Nevertheless ... we recommend that pregnancy be ... a reason for automatic termination of the service of ... both officers and other ranks'.

The 1975 Anti Discrimination (Pay) Act, the 1977 Employment Equality Act and the 1981 Maternity Protection of Employees Act however put paid to these negative aspirations for women and pressure mounted on the military authorities for the fullest integration of women into the Irish Defence Forces.

For the women officer cadets of 1980 and 1981 the challenges were daunting. The military authorities initially drew up separate 'female' training programmes for female cadets and recruits. For women officers, this meant that instead of doing heavy weapons training on mortars, machine guns and anti-tank weapons, they were given an intensive course on dress and deportment – and in one case were instructed to walk up and down the drill shed in the Curragh Camp balancing books on their heads. In scenes reminiscent of 'My Fair Lady', one female officer described it as 'A dress and deportment course. Right down to the basics – like putting on eye-shadow. It did wonders for Lancome. The day before we

were commissioned they sent us loads of samples. I've stayed with them since'. One female officer added, 'We did a grooming course. It's a pity the guys didn't do it as well. I know some who needed it'.

As more and more women were enlisted into the Defence Forces during the 1980s however, female soldiers exerted more and more pressure on their superiors for greater equality in terms of their training, deployment and promotion within the army. The general staff slowly began to respond to this internal pressure from female soldiers and by the early 1990s, women were no longer trained separately in single-sex recruit platoons and female officer cadets were enduring precisely the same syllabus of training as their male counterparts.

Gradually, all of the barriers to the fullest participation of women in the Irish Defence Forces began to crumble. There were many key turning points. Initially prohibited from participation in ceremonial duties, the election of Mary Robinson as President and Commander in Chief of the Defence Forces in 1992 saw women in uniform participate in guards of honour and the iconography of state for the first time in the history of independent Ireland.

The early 1990s also saw female officers commissioned into the Air Corps with female pilots flying hazardous search and rescue missions at sea during the latter half of that decade. The first Female Naval Service officers were commissioned in 1997. In 2000, an in-depth doctoral study into the status and roles assigned Irish female soldiers – conducted by a serving army officer - was published. This led to an acceleration of the equality agenda for both men and women within the defence forces. Since then, there has been a profound and rapid integration of women soldiers, aircrew and sailors into all of the front line and combat roles of the Irish defence forces both at home and abroad. The numbers of female personnel in the Defence Forces have also grown rapidly in the last decade and women now comprise almost 6% of the army's current strength.

In 2004, the Defence Forces published an equality mission statement and comprehensive set of equality policies that are representative of best practice among the international military. In many ways, the Irish Defence Forces have taken the equality agenda further than many of its EU and NATO counterparts. Unlike the British and US military for example, all front-line roles within the Irish Defence Forces are open to women. In this regard, Irish women soldiers have become world leaders in peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations at home and abroad.