

50 years on, a Limerick soldier remembers

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ARMED with only a bolt action 303 Enfield rifle and suffocating searing heat in his bulls wool made uniform, 18-year old Andrew Foran from Kileely parachuted into the Congo as one of the first-ever



Andrew Foran, aged 18, after landing in the Congo in 1960

Irish soldiers to land in the African jungle, where he would spend more than a year dodging bullets while keeping the peace amongst warring native factions.

Next Friday, July 23, a special commemorative ceremony will take place at Baldonnell, Co Dublin to mark the 50th anniversary of the Irish Army's first tour of duty in the Congo in 1960.

The memories of those bloody and horrific combat days will never leave the former 12th Battalion infantry Limerick soldier, who now resides in the far more peaceful town of Shannon.

"A lot of my mates who served with me then are dead. I haven't been able to keep in touch with the rest. I'd like to see them again though, that is, if they turn up next Friday. I was 18 when I went. We were put into a war zone. It was crazy. It was very sad, as the ordinary people over there were beautiful people and it was a beautiful country. Unfortunately it was also very violent," Andrew remembered.

Staring out of the main entrance of the offices of the *Limerick Independ-*



Andrew Foran (circled) with the 12th Battalion, Limerick Unit, before leaving for the Congo on their first ever peace-keeping mission with the UN

ent on O'Connell Street, as he told me his story, another of Andrew's memories from his time in the Congo was triggered. He pointed out onto the street and recalled: "This week, 50 years ago, we marched down that street, through Limerick City, before we left. There were thousands on the streets. All we had were our rosary beads and our scapulars. We were the first troops to go to the Congo. I was lucky I survived. Many didn't."

The former Belgian Congo became an independent African Republic

on 30 June 1960. Only a matter of days later, the Congolese government requested military assistance from the United Nations to maintain its territorial integrity, and the Irish troops were sent in to keep the peace as part of the UN force ONUC.

The tour into Africa was the most costly enterprise for the Irish Army since the Irish Civil War, as 26 Irish soldiers lost their lives; nine perishing in one action, known as the Niamba Ambush.

For Andrew and the rest of his unit of infantry sol-

diers it was the first time they had been outside of Limerick, let alone another country. His first tour of duty was for six months and he returned to the Congo for a second tour in 1961. Together, both tours lasted for more than a year, and led Andrew fighting more than just the troops of the Congo, who were a major force having armed themselves with automatic weapons against the single bolt rifles used by the Irish.

"We left for the Congo from Baldonnell in American transport planes. It

took us four days just to get there, as we had to divert to Libya because of engine problems. Our uniforms were made from bulls wool. We headed to the Congo in the worst type of clothes. The heat was unimaginable and inside the uniform we had to wear a shirt made from mohair, it was just incredible. Later we got a more suitable uniform from the UN."

Even though the Irish troops were fighting the African troops in their own backyard in the most searing heat, wearing the worst of uniforms for the terrain

and climate; and although the Irish found themselves facing automatic gunfire with only single barrel to respond with, Andrew is adamant that the Irish army's 'superb training kicked in and saved him and many others from near certain death.

"I was an infantry man with the rest of the men fighting on the frontline. I saw a lot of things happen. I was lucky I had great training."

As Andrew left the newspaper's office, with yet another trip back to Baldonnell firmly on his mind, he looked back at me, stalled and remarked: "I hope it was worth it..."

A total of 6,000 Irish men served in the Congo from 1960 until 1964 including many from Limerick. A 'Niamba Ambush commemoration' is hosted annually by the Irish Veterans Organisation the Organisation of National Ex-Servicemen & Women (ONET) in Cathal Brugha Barracks, Dublin, on the nearest Saturday to the actual date of the ambush in the Congo.

