

Navy man steps down after long, distinguished service

By PADDY MORONEY

ONE of the best-known Naval Reserve officers in the country will soon retire from his appointment in charge of the Limerick unit.

Lt Cdr Robert "Bobby" Mulrooney will retire from An Slua Muiri, after a lifetime of unbroken service to the Limerick No 5 company.

Bobby has been officer commanding of the unit over the past three decades, overseeing the development of the company to its present strength and capability.

A past pupil of the Crescent College, Bobby was involved in the unit since his teens, and later became widely-known throughout the city not only through his business, as a fruit merchant, but for the success of the Limerick unit, which he came to command at an early stage.

He is over 30 years a commissioned officer.

Although the date for his retirement has been set for Friday, October 28, a celebratory dinner-dance will be held on the previous Saturday, October 22, at Jury's Hotel.

Many naval colleagues, both regular and reserve, serving and retired, from all over the country are expected to the function, staying overnight.

The Limerick unit is, in fact, just one of five throughout the country, others are based in Dublin — where there are two units — as well as Cork and Waterford.

Each year, the units combine to have their annual camp at a set dates at Templebreedy, at the entrance to Cork Harbour, but many personnel unable to make the week, for various reasons, later serve aboard the vessels of the Naval Service, individually.

The Slua Muiri was founded in 1940, during the Emergency years, as the Maritime Inscription, named after a like organisation that existed in France during the French Revolution, 150 years earlier.

The Slua Muiri is still today not unlike that of its former French namesake, as rôles go, which provided a close-in patrol service of the French coastline during the 1789 period.

Its rôle today is mainly that of port control and seaward defence in the vicinity of harbours in times of emergency.

Port control — during the Emergency years here, it was left to the supervision of a harbour master with a temporary Naval Service rank appropriate to his former ocean-going experience — involves controlling the movements of visiting ships in port and the carrying out of inspections.

During the 1940-'45 period, all the members of the Maritime Inscription/Slua Muiri were called up, technically, and then released on indefinite leave to continue with their normal civilian occupations, but called out, the odd time, to inspect a visiting ship.

This its members did enthusiastically, earning a nation-wide respect for the force for professionalism and courtesy which was second to none by war's end.

The Slua Muiri has been reputed to be the only naval reserve in the world with colours entirely of its own: a flag with a castle with anchor superimposed, emphasising the port control and coastal/seaward

defence rôles of the service.

These colours were presented at a ceremony in Cathal Brugha Barracks in Dublin in September 1961, attended by a huge contingent of Limerick members, who participated in the guard of honour.

The colours were formally received on behalf of the entire organisation by the then O/C of the Limerick unit, Lt Cdr Alfie White.

From its early years, the Maritime Inscription / Slua Muiri had a large presence on the lower Shannon, as well as Limerick, and had a close relationship with another organisation, the Marine and Coast-Watching Service.

The Marine and Coast-watching Service itself was, at an early stage, divided into two completely separate organisations: one became the Coast-watching Service, disbanded at the end of the 1940-'46 Emergency, and the other the Naval Service.

Some relics of the period survived in the Limerick Region, down to recent years, such as the little look-out concrete bunker, in derelict condition, which could formerly be seen beside the road just south of Black Head in County

Clare.

The lower Shannon forts, reactivated during the emergency years by the Army, can still be seen.

The ability during the war years of the fledgling naval reserve, and its full-time operational parent, to fulfil rôles "in support" was determined by the vessels available, given the wartime shortages.

Aside from port control, seaward defence also remains a designated rôle for the organisation.

This, in theory, would include anything from minelaying to minesweeping, or minehunting, with anti-submarine protection thrown in for good measure, using craft appropriate to the sea conditions off the coast.

This, of course, requires intensive training and practice, and the Naval Service helps out as much as possible with training, given the limitations on accommodation and facilities on the fishery protection vessels.

All of the Irish-built naval vessels off the coast are dedicated to the rôle of fishery protection, with other faster ships given the job of policing the coastline in search of drugs, guns and contraband generally. These

roles are, like the Irish-designed ships themselves, not unlike those of the United States Coast Guard, a separate organisation from the US Navy which operates directly under the US Treasury.

There has always been a need for training ships for Slua Muiri, and though there are a number of large yachts available — very valuable for training in seamanship and navigation, as well as character formation — the organisation did, at one stage, have the naval vessel, Setanta (the mythical Irish hero who symbolised youth).

Moving to the generalised naval picture, worldwide, and not necessarily relating to Ireland, seaward defence involves a variety of operations to secure a major estuary or port, and a fairly extensive area offshore.

In many countries, this would involve minesweeping and minehunting, carried out by specialised vessel; minelaying in friendly harbours (but never, under any circumstances, in the harbours of opponents) is carried out by surface vessels.

These have the requisite speed and specialisation, as

mining one's own harbour is a very extensive and quite lengthy operation, depending on the area to be covered and the pace of work.

Anti-submarine work is carried out by vessels of a wide range of tonnages and speed, though for reasons of economy, many smaller budget-conscious countries, with definite limits on spending in any event, try to incorporate more than one rôle in each ship.