



OUT OF THE CLOUDS

In this article, Wesley Bourke reports on how Defence Forces parachuting has taken a further leap into the military sphere...

Photographs by Armn Billy Galligan

ONTO THE BATTLEFIELD



In September, the Parachute Training Team ran the first ever DF Military Static Line (MSL) Parachute Course conducted over the DFTC, Curragh Camp. Until recently, apart from the Army Ranger Wing (ARW), parachuting was seen primarily as a sporting activity and the annual basic parachuting course was much sought after. However, future young entry parachute courses will be conducted on a military model, as opposed to the sports model used previously. Sports parachuting will continue as an adventure training activity under the auspices of DFCAT (the DF Council for Adventure Training), but will focus on freefall skills, with a view to maximising participation by all ranks and consolidating the DF's display and competition skydiving team 'The Black Knights'.

This new MSL course is designed primarily for the deployment of a fully equipped soldier by parachute onto the battlefield. The emphasis will be on qualifying specialists (recce pers, FOOs, snipers and others) as military static line parachutists, so that they are similarly qualified to the international counterparts they meet on overseas service or foreign courses.

Ultimately, the parachute used in the military context is just another means for a commander to deploy his forces from the more traditional methods: on foot, by vehicle or by boat. Currently, the ARW is the only Defence Forces unit which trains to deploy operationally by parachute.

'The traditional basic parachuting course up until now was a sporting course, while this new course is military,' said jumpmaster and instructor Flt Sgt Jay Curley (Air Corps College). 'Now a student comes on this course, with their Integrated Protection and Load Carrying System (IPLCS) and he or she will do five jumps, including two combat jumps (jumping with full kit and rifle).' Jumping from 1,000-1,500ft, the student uses a tactical military spec canopy, which is opened by a static line attached to the aircraft. Unlike square 'steerable' canopies, used by advanced military/special forces parachutists and sportsmen, the round canopy cannot be flown, but it can be slightly guided. The use of the static line and the military spec canopy enables the jumpmaster to get the maximum number of parachutists onto the designated drop zone in the shortest period of time.

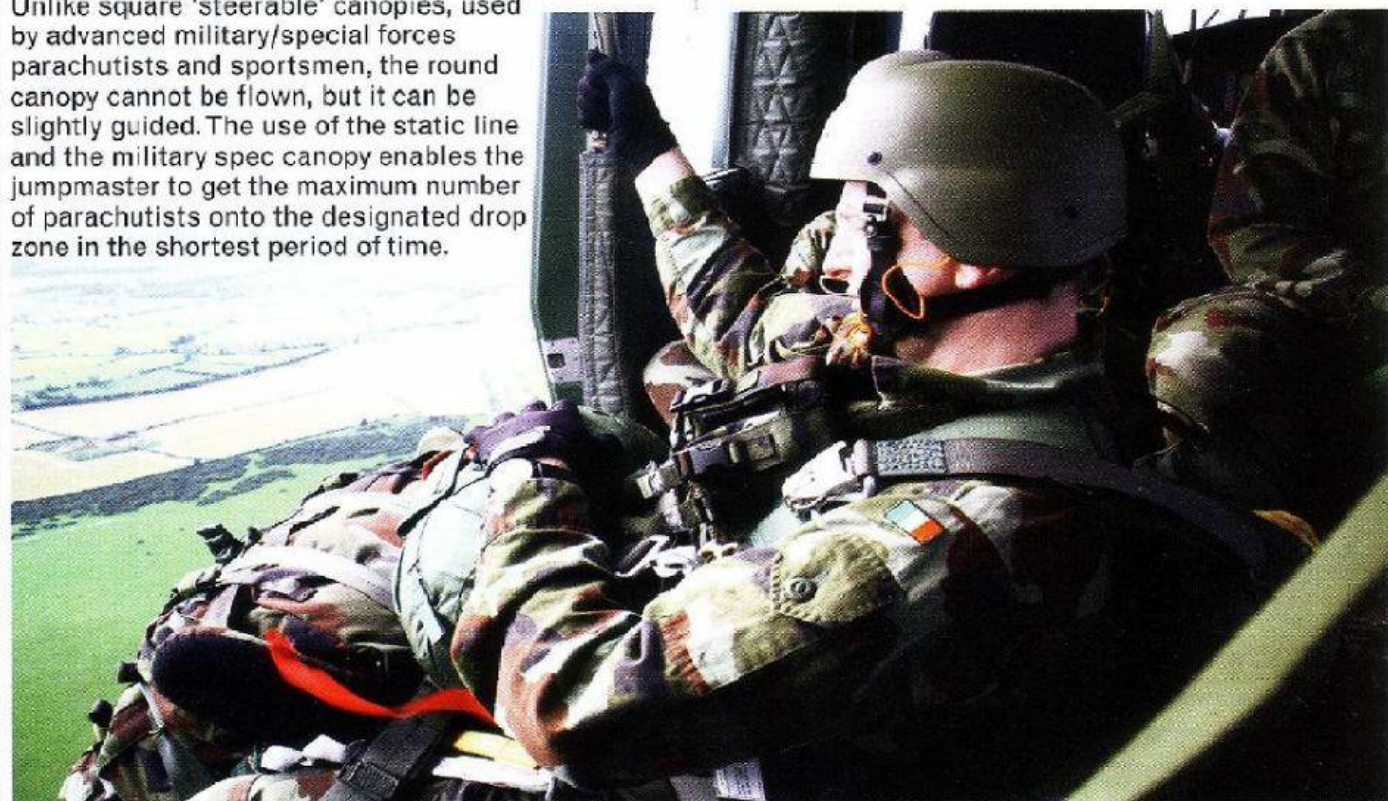
The Defence Forces recently purchased 50 sets of the TP-2Z Troop Personnel Main Parachute System and the RTP-26Z Reserve Troop Parachute. These military spec parachutes and harnesses are made by CIMSA in Spain. Apart from the new parachutes, the Air Corps AW139 helicopter has made it possible to deploy six parachutists (without equipment) on one overhead pass, or four with full kit and weapons. Using best international practice, the course was broken into three phases. First was the ground school where students went through all the procedures of parachuting before even stepping into an aircraft. Safety is paramount in all aspects of the course and though there was a relaxed training regime, students had to concentrate and learn the drills until they became instinctive. Students also learn about the care of their parachuting equipment; the proper fitting of the parachute and harness; their position in the aircraft; how to guide the canopy; emergency drills and commands used by the jumpmaster. For the purpose of the course, a wooden mock-up of the interior of an AW139 was used to dry run students in all drills.

In the second phase, the students had to master what is known as the 'Five Points of Performance'. These are: Position in the door; Exit; Canopy Control; Parachute Landing Roll (PLR) and Gathering of Equipment.

'PLR is essentially landing the canopy and this is a critical procedure which students are assessed on,' said Sgt Pdraig Costello (32 Res Inf Bn). 'If the student encounters an emergency, there are several drills he has to perform. We teach them this procedure in a hanging harness suspended from the roof.'

The third phase is naturally the jumps themselves and to pass the course, each student has to complete five jumps, three without gear and two carrying their IPLCS and weapon. 'The students have to complete three 'Hollywood' jumps,' continued Flt Sgt Curley, 'this is without kit. What we are looking for here is that they carry out all the procedures and drills correctly. Once we have assessed them, they then have to do two jumps with equipment.'

The jumpmasters are experienced and seasoned parachutists and their main job is to look after the parachutists in the aircraft on the flight up to the





designated jump height. They are in constant contact with the pilot and crew and they must confirm the aircraft is over the correct exit spot and at the same time ensure that the wind speed and conditions are ideal for the parachutists to jump safely and tactically. Luckily, the pilots and air crew are highly professional, allowing jumpmasters to concentrate on supervising the jumpers. Jumping from a height between 1,000 and 1,500ft, the jumper's parachute deploys automatically within six seconds of leaving the aircraft and it typically takes about a minute to a minute and a half to land on the drop zone. When jumping with kit, the parachutist will release a strap about 100 to 150m above the ground, which allows the pack to drop four metres and this will hit the ground before he or she does.

'As jumpmaster you are looking out for positioning of jumpers and equipment and the safe routing of the static lines,' explained Cpl Ray Hennessy (4 Sp Wing AC and Chief Rigger).

'As a military jumpmaster, this is completely different from freefall parachuting. With a sports canopy, the parachutist can decide where to land - now the onus is on the jumpmaster. The military parachutist cannot steer his canopy, so it's my responsibility to ensure that the exit point is correct.'

MSL courses will now be run on an annual basis, in place of the former basic (i.e. young entry) sports course. 'We are now using the Agusta Westland 139 helicopter,' Sgt Costello added. 'Before now we were using the Cessna aircraft for basic courses, and although it gave fantastic service, it was small and restricted to only two students per jump, and up to a maximum of six parachutists in an hour, with no possibility of jumping with kit. This heli can take up to six students and jump them every ten to fifteen minutes. Without extra resources, instructors or training time, more personnel can be trained as parachutists, this time to a military standard.'

'Now that we have a strong team of qualified instructors and jumpmasters, we can start focusing on DF specialists such as Recce, FOO, snipers and combat medics and train them to deploy tactically from the air,' continued Flt Sgt Curley.

'How often have guys gone on a course or trip overseas and found that their counterparts were qualified in parachuting? Now with a little pre-planning and an MSL course they can go over fully trained. Apart from that, the course builds up great confidence, as it practices you in operating professionally while under a certain amount of stress, in a controlled training environment.'

For anyone thinking of joining the ARW, this is the exact same course you would do in your skills phase with the unit. Rangers can however progress onto 'steerable' square canopies for special operations and carry out freefall training for High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) or High Altitude High Opening (HAHO) insertions.

For specialists wishing to add another skill and a bit of adrenaline into their Defence Forces career and train to tactically deploy from the air onto the battlefield, look out for the next MSL Course, provisionally scheduled for September 2010.

On the sports side, a Display Skills course for qualified freefallers is scheduled for next July, where new candidates will be qualified to join the 'Black Knights' and conduct display jumps as part of the DF public relations effort. ■

VOX POP

Here, we find out what some of the students thought of the course.

Sgt Ronnie Burke (DFHQ)

'The parachuting course is something I have always wanted to do. I applied for the course several times and I got onto one course, years ago, but in the middle of it I deployed overseas. So, when the opportunity came up again, I took it. The instructors and students are great and by the time I had to do my first jump, I was calm and confident. Getting into the helicopter I knew I would jump. The nerves were there, but you just went through what you had been taught. Today we are doing our combat jumps, which is something I never thought I would hear myself saying in my career. I would not like to stop here and this course has given me huge confidence in myself. I would like to get my packing certificate, keep on jumping and go from there.'

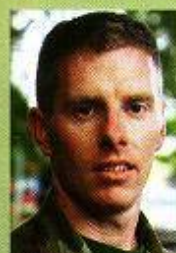


Capt Niall Goff (Air Corps)

'As a pilot you get parachute training, but only for emergencies and you don't actually jump. I had piloted a Cessna aircraft during a few parachute missions in the past and I got to know the lads. While watching them jump out of the back of the plane, I said to myself, I would like to give it a go and see what it is like. The course has been very enjoyable and comprehensive. A lot of drills and dry runs before you actually go up. This in turn gives you great confidence. So, when you go up for the first time you know exactly what to do and what the jumpmaster is doing. When it comes to your turn, you are very relaxed. I am going to keep it up and I hope to join a parachute club.'

Cpl Dave Fanning (31 Res Cav Sqn)

'That there was my 48th jump and my hobby is actually historical jumping, where we reenact famous jumps, such as the D-Day and Arnhem wartime jumps. We use round parachutes like the ones we are using here today, out of a Curtis C-47 or a Douglas DC-3 (Dakota) vintage aircraft. Jumping over Normandy, watching sticks falling from other aircraft is an indescribable experience! To do a military course like this and get Defence Forces wings was an opportunity not to be missed. The course and the instruction has been spot on. Very professional and there has not been one injury and everyone is jumping, which is great.'



Pte Colin Curran (3 Inf Bn)

'Parachuting is my sport and I have 850 jumps. I am a jumpmaster on square parachutes, an accelerated freefall instructor and I want to progress and become a military jumpmaster. This course is a different ball game. It is designed purely with a military application in mind. You are in the helicopter attached to a static line and you jump over a drop zone and you cannot steer these parachute, unlike the ones I am used too. You are now jumping with full kit and rifle.'