

JADOTVILLE AND NIEMBA

NOW TIME TO MAKE IT RIGHT

Between 1960 and 1964 up to 6,000 Irish soldiers served with the UN in the Democratic Republic of Congo. More than 30 recommendations, mostly associated with Jadotville and Niemba, were disregarded for reasons that continue to remain an enigma. However, no explanation for this neglect has ever been offered to date, writes Nicholas Cunningham.



Soldiers digging in at the camp in Jadotville.

During those years, a sizeable number of our troops discharged their duties way beyond what was expected of them and that bravery was acknowledged by their commanding officers. Many of those recommendations were accepted by army chiefs and medals awarded.

The event at Jadotville was very different to the incident at Niemba, primarily because our troops at Jadotville were expecting to be attacked. They didn't know what the attack may look like or when it might take place and they certainly didn't expect that it would be as ferocious and determined as it turned out to be. So, with their limited and aged resources they prepared and they waited. At Niemba, the attack was unexpected, our troops were "ambushed"

FIVE-DAY SIEGE AT JADOTVILLE

In September 1961, 150 Irish soldiers of 'A' Company 35th Battalion under the command of Commandant Pat Quinlan was ordered to Jadotville. From the outset, his troops became quickly aware that their presence there wasn't welcome.

At that point, they could have safely withdrawn, but their orders were to take possession of an abandoned school as their base and to remain until directed to withdraw. On 3 September, they did as ordered and took possession of their difficult-to-defend base, where their only protection from attack was their leadership, bravery

and a couple of scattered school buildings and vitally, the fox holes they dug, as ordered by their commanding officer!

The first few days were very precarious indeed. While on patrol, troops were continuously harassed and threatened by mercenary and the Katangan army. This action was concerning and caused our soldiers to be extremely cautious and alert. On 9 September their compound was surrounded and their positions sporadically fired on as the Katangan military build up continued in preparation for an all-out attack! Regrettably, early on Sunday 13 September the assault began.

The Irish had prepared to defend their position and they fought back! It was a ferocious and terrifying engagement against more than 3,000 much better equipped, experienced, aggressive and determined mercenary and Katangan soldiers. They were opposed by 150 inexperienced Irish UN troops who gave their attackers the fight of their lives and maybe also the 'fright' of their lives.

'A' Company bravely stood their ground and even though their weaponry was less powerful and older than their aggressors, they successfully repulsed every advance on their position, inflicting serious harm on them including fatalities! Sadly, 300 of their attackers died and many more were injured during the five-day siege.

Commandant Quinlan didn't invite conflict and he certainly didn't want people to die, especially his own

soldiers, but his troops needed to defend themselves and to survive and they did just that. A small number of our troops were injured too, none were serious and no fatalities TG, testament certainly to their bravely, leadership, discipline and patriotism.

Before departing their HQ for Jadotville, Fr. Thomas Fagan, Chaplain to the 35th Battalion, consecrated 'A' Company to 'The Immaculate Heart of Mary'. He then travelled with them to Jadotville where he served with distinction, becoming one of the 33 members cited by Commandant Quinlan for his bravery. None of those recommendations were acceded to. No other country would have dishonoured their soldiers the way we did.



Katangan military patrolling around the Irish Camp.

The Irish troops defended their position and themselves and indeed the UN and Ireland honourably and bravely. They obeyed orders to the letter as was their duty and responsibility and only stopped fighting when they had nothing left to fight with. They had run out of food, water and finally ammunition. The only choice left was to negotiate a safe armistice with the local political leaders and their attackers and to stand down.

During their distressing ordeal, they were gifted a glimmer of hope when told that a company of well-armed UN relief troops was on the way. Regrettably, as the column approached the Lufira Bridge a short distance from Jadotville, they were attacked by a large force of well-armed and positioned Congolese army supported by a Fouga Jet-fighter plane, which steadily strafed the UN relief troops inflicting many casualties on them including fatalities.

Fighting back, the UN relief troops engaged their attackers to a stand-still, inflicting many casualties on them also and destroying much of the Congolese army equipment. Unfortunately, they were unable to break through and under heavy fire, were forced to withdraw leaving those at Jadotville to continue without support!

On 17 September, the mission at Jadotville ended when Commandant

Quinlan and his company of brave and exhausted Irish soldiers marched proudly out of their compound into captivity and on 25 October 1961, they were finally released into UN hands.

THE AMBUSH AT NIEMBA

Lt Kevin Gleeson and his unit, while on patrol from their base at Niemba, came to a halt at a damaged bridge where he and his senior NCO stepped out of their vehicles to inspect the damage. Due to the risk of being attacked was so unexpected, other soldiers curiously stepped out of their vehicles too leaving some of their weapons in their transport, including two light machine guns.

Regrettably, within a short time, the eleven-man patrol was attacked from both sides by a large party of armed, loud and angry tribesmen, quickly preventing the soldiers from retrieving weapons from their vehicles. A deadly battle ensued and sadly, nine Irish soldiers died.

Only seven of the 11-man patrol were armed during battle. One member of the patrol, Trooper Anthony Browne (whose body wasn't found for two years following the ambush) was posthumously awarded The Military Medal for Gallantry with Distinction. A very deserving award indeed.

The question I would ask though,

is why were no bravery awards offered to the two survivors and the families of those who died? After all, each member of the platoon was a victim of the same terrifying and unexpected attack and their instincts and determination to survive were equal as they fought and struggled to defend themselves and to endure.

When ambushed, the sensation of surprise and shock and principally unpreparedness, reduces considerably the ability of soldiers to respond effectively, even to the extent that some might be unable to return fire. Mostly the victims have no prior warning that they are about to be attacked. Sometimes suspicious activity might be noticed, but suspicion alone is not confirmation that an ambush is imminent and is certainly not justification for the use of lethal force.

In their struggle to survive, troops killed ten of their ambushers and wounded many more. That outcome clearly demonstrated that our gravely outnumbered soldiers fought back. Our State concluded though that, with the exception of trooper Anthony Browne, no other soldier deserved to be honoured for their so obvious stoic bravery.

"A gallant fight against overwhelming numbers" was how it was described in at least one military

magazine. A couple of days following the ambush, a group of the Baluba attackers were arrested and they too commented on the valiant fight by the Irish soldiers

FIRST UNNERVING CONGO EXPERIENCE

It is widely known, that even in the best trained armies in the world when under attack, only 20% can be depended on to immediately perform as trained. Our soldiers clearly performed above and beyond those statistics – *it is never too late to correct an injustice which when delayed, is denied.*

No Irish soldier posted to the Congo at that time had combat experience. For those at Niemba and Jadotville, it was their first, an unnerving escalation of their so-far apathetic Congo experience. They were poorly armed ordinary Irish soldiers doing their best for the UN and Ireland.

Sadly, they remain un-acknowledged by our State for their bravery. It is not too late to correct that decision. In time, their names might not be on the tip of our tongues, but those pernicious episodes in our young soldiers' lives, including the neglect by our State, will not be forgotten. Niemba and Jadotville are part of Ireland's and its army's history and will continue to be remembered and celebrated.

Within only ten days of formation, our trusting soldiers were dispatched



Scene of the Niemba ambush.

to the Democratic Republic of Congo, probably the most dangerously volatile region of our world at that time. Except for their new FN rifles, which were not on issue to our troops at Niemba, their equipment for the most part could be likened to the WWII era.

TIME TO CORRECT INJUSTICE

The award of military campaign medals is an official acknowledgement that the recipients took part in the particular military action. The award is not

an admission that the recipient performed in any special way, it simply indicates that he/she was present during the incident and that was the only intention of the Niemba and Jadotville medals awarded to date.

The Military Star Medal is awarded similarly, but to the next of kin of those killed in combat. Far short of individual bravery medals as recommended by Commandant Quinlan and others. Courage, respect, integrity and loyalty are four Defence Forces values which are important to all members and are strictly adhered to.

On 23 May 2021, I emailed the Minister asking him to correct this lingering injustice. On 15 June that year, his office replied, informing me that the Minister and the Chief of Staff have agreed to establish an independent group of experts to examine the events specific to Jadotville. Until the group completes its examination and announces its findings, I reserve judgement.

Photographs are courtesy of Commandant (Retd) Oliver Barbour's private collection and the Army Archives at Cathal Brugha Barracks.

About the Author: Retired Garda Nick Cunningham is an active member of the Meath Branch of An Garda Síochána Retired Members' Association (GSRMA). His article was first published in the Spring 2022 issue of 'Síocháin' (the GSRMA's official magazine).



Funeral of the soldiers who died at Niemba.