

THE HOT ZONE

The reality of working in a country at war and under invasion is outlined by the former Head of Security for the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Ukraine, Commandant (Ret'd) Daniel Sheeran, the recently appointed Regional Security Adviser for WHO Europe and Central Asia, who also talks about his career in the Defence Forces and the United Nations.

I joined the Defence Forces (DF) in 1998 as part of the 75th Cadet Class. I was commissioned in 2000 and was posted to A Company, 6th Infantry Battalion in Cavan. I was fortunate that upon commissioning I got the opportunity to train two recruit platoons in my first year. One in Cavan and then one in Mullingar. I was also fortunate to have served in Connolly Barracks in Longford with the 4th Cavalry Squadron in my first year as an officer – a unit my father served in

many moons ago as a Trooper!

Upon completion of my first year as an officer, I attended university in Galway and completed a year of study in Spain on ERASMUS. Also, during my first few years I served in the 6th Infantry Battalion in either Cavan or Athlone. I also served in the 4th Logistical Support Battalion and later in my career in Donegal with the 28th Infantry Battalion in Finner Camp.

My final posting in the DF was as an Instructor in the UN Training School in the Curragh. I would have

to say my time within the DF was very rewarding and enjoyable. If I had to pick, I would say my time in the UN School in the Curragh as my most rewarding as I was dealing with multiple personnel from across the DF and with external partners and stakeholders from outside the forces in the humanitarian community, Irish Aid and academia.

My overseas service included Liberia, Chad, and Lebanon, which were all very interesting and rewarding. I found Liberia fascinating



WHO Executive Director for Emergencies, Dr Mike Ryan (right), being briefed by Daniel Sheeran (left) in Bucha during the visit of WHO Director General Dr Tedros in May 2022.

as it was my first time in Africa. In Chad I did back-to-back trips as I was in the Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC) role, and this involved liaison, co-ordination and engagement with humanitarian actors.

My extended time in Chad was also partly down to being the only French speaker at the time in the battalion and I was willing to extend, such was the enjoyment in this role! I also served in the UN Mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) where I served in the Sector West (Brigade) HQ with Italian and other multinational colleagues.

I left the DF in 2014 on a two-year leave of absence (LoA) and deployed with the UN to the civil war in Central African Republic (CAR). I retired from the DF in 2016 at the rank of Commandant when my LoA finished.

UNITED NATION DEPLOYMENTS

In Bangui, I worked in a similar role to the one I carried out in Chad except as a civilian with the UN Office for Co-ordination for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Subsequently I was appointed as the Chief of Operations for the Security Section within the new UN peacekeeping mission there called MINUSCA.

I remained in this role for two more years and in 2017 I was appointed WHO's Field Security Adviser in northeast Nigeria – an area fuelled by a terrorist insurgency by Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa.

In 2018 I deployed for a year to Colombia with the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and then in 2019 I took up a post within the Joint Operations Centre with the UN Mission in DRC, MONUSCO, in Goma, Eastern DRC.

I also assumed the role of Business Continuity and Resilience Manager in the mission. In 2022 I received a promotion and was appointed the Humanitarian Co-ordination Officer with the UN special political mission in Yemen where retired General Michael Beary is the Head of Mission. A year later in 2022 when the war in Ukraine broke out WHO approached me to set up the security system, protocols, and team for their operations here.

SECURITY ADVISORY ROLE

In my role as Country Security Adviser for WHO programming and operations in Ukraine, based in Kyiv. I advised the WHO country

representative and the management team on safety and security within WHO, with a responsibility to lead the WHO security team in Ukraine.

I was the first security officer appointed in WHO Europe, which included Central Asia. This is an area which covers 53 member states from Dublin to Tashkent. Since arriving in Ukraine, the team expanded to a total of seven security staff, and I put plans in place to have a fully established team of 13 security officers (both international and national) to be deployed in the key UN hubs in Kyiv, Lviv, Dnipro and Odessa.

The core elements and responsibilities included managing the safety and security of WHO personnel and for assets and premises. This took many forms such as security briefings, movement tracking, security assessments for field missions to high-risk and very high-risk areas. Another core element was security planning on internal WHO security plans for contingencies such as relocation of personnel.

A major facet within security planning was to ensure the set-up of communications networks such as VHF communications for staff



As the security lead Daniel Sheerin had devised and managed the security budget, which he said was “substantial for operating in Ukraine”.

and satellite phones for key staff and operations. Having a business continuity background from previous UN posts, I introduced strategic satellite-based communications systems such as Starlink and BGAN to enable business continuity for WHO operations. This involved ensuring personnel were trained on this equipment and able to operate it in high and very high-risk environments or when business continuity has been affected.

As the world has seen, Kyiv and many other major Ukrainian cities have been subject to Russian Federation (RF) missile strikes. Therefore, the accounting of staff via rapid and accessible headcounts is key in ensuring staff are safe and secure. Training is not limited to the likes of communications equipment; along with other UN agency security officers and trainers, we provided hostile environment training to all UN personnel deployed in country.

This covered vehicle and convoy planning, medical/trauma first aid and working in a hostile environment and mine risk education. This was also facilitated for partner International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). As the security lead I devised and managed the security budget, which must be substantial for operating in Ukraine as major capital investment has had to be put in place to ensure enhanced staff safety and security.

This included the provision of ballistic protection in the form of body armour and helmets, communications equipment like VHF handsets and satellite phones, and individual first aid trauma kits to name but a few. Another major outlay included the purchase of armoured vehicles (required for operating in high-risk and very high-risk environments where there are numerous threats to UN personnel when carrying out the likes of distribution of humanitarian aid and also humanitarian assessments).

Threats included shelling, missiles, or drone strikes close to the line of contact by RF troops, crossfire incidents, and operating in areas that are highly contaminated by landmines and other unexploded ordnance. Currently it is assessed that more than 30 per cent of the territory of Ukraine is contaminated

in this way, therefore these vehicles are crucial for operating in such a restrictive and high-risk environment.

WHO'S FOOTPRINT IN UKRAINE

Before the war the WHO had a major presence here in Ukraine. The country office was very proactive in advising and assisting the government of Ukraine in the increased and improved delivery of health services. The WHO country representative and the team continue to do sterling work in this regard. The organisation has ramped up its operations and programming, which in turn has seen the deployment of more personnel into the country; 300 personnel will be deployed by the year end.

WHO now has two main pillars to deliver its programming and operations. The first is the Emergencies Programme that includes the WHO leading the UN system-wide health cluster, health information and risk management pillar, and the provision of field offices in Kyiv, Lviv, Dnipro, Poltava, and Odessa. The second is the provision of health programmes. These include the non-emergency type activities such as health surveillance and labs, health financing, health governance, health planning and recovery, assisting the government in drafting public health laws and policies and mental health services and efforts to curb

polio and other vaccine-preventable diseases.

All these activities outlined above work in tandem with both the government response and strategies and also within the UN response system so as to have an efficient and targeted delivery of programmes and also to avoid duplication and wasting of resources. Security is a cross-cutting element in all of these activities. The security team assists personnel operating in these activities to plan the likes of field missions and assessments, and to train and brief them on security procedures and protocols. The whole aim of the security section is to enable programming and operations in a safe and secure environment.

CHALLENGES OF MEDIA COVERAGE

Media coverage and spotlight on a humanitarian crisis and conflict is usually welcome. Although the circumstances are difficult and tragic, I feel that any media focus usually heightens general awareness of the issues at hand. This also has the knock-on effect of increased donations, from donors or the general public. The conflict in Ukraine is probably the most 'online' or 'live' conflict in history and with that comes a lot of chatter and noise.

This is something that myself personally and others working in country in the humanitarian



Daniel in Bangui in the Central African Republic in 2014 after evacuating Muslim minority Internally Displaced Persons from the city during the civil war.

community and other international organisations have had to deal with. Our messaging was very focused on ensuring we were there to support Ukraine in its efforts and to ensure humanitarian programming will be provided to the most vulnerable and needy. We kept the core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence at the root of all we aimed to achieve in Ukraine and around the world.

OBSERVATIONS ON PREVIOUS DEPLOYMENTS

As a staff member in WHO or in the UN, in general the one long-standing issue is funding for humanitarian operations. The humanitarian community across the globe constantly requires more funding due to the emergencies in effect in many of the most war-torn countries on the planet.

Additionally, climate change is a major issue in many of these countries. We now see it in Europe with the spiking temperatures in April in Spain and the onset of drought. This is magnified multiple times in fragile states like CAR, Yemen, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa.

In CAR, it was my first deployment as a civilian UN staff member, firstly as a humanitarian working with OCHA and then as a security professional with the UN peacekeeping mission. During my three years, there was a rapid and steep learning curve with regard to the delivery of humanitarian operations and then providing security services to UN staff.

As the operational and logistics commander during the visit of Pope Francis to Bangui in late 2015, I found this one of the most challenging and most rewarding tasks in either my military or civilian career. Many skills I learned and developed in the DF were key in this regard. Especially when planning with UN peacekeeping forces and national security actors.

Yemen was a very difficult place to operate and carry out the UN mandate, because movements were highly restricted and made for a lot of frustration. General (Ret'd) Michael Beary brought a great new impetus when he arrived and brought a fresh vigour

and dynamism to the mission there, albeit in tough operating circumstances. It was a pleasure to work with him.

LIVE THEATRE OF COMBAT OPERATIONS

Obviously operating in a humanitarian workspace is different to the military one I have worked in before. This can be seen in the operating cultures and the rigid hierarchy that the military brings. There are also parallels that humanitarian operations are planned in a coordinated and military-like fashion with the use of Standard Operating Procedures and operational orders.

The logistics sphere of the organisation is similar to the military regarding transport, fuel and other resources. I served in a logistics battalion in the army, and this has given me a great appreciation

for what is required to deliver humanitarian operations. The saying that amateurs think tactics and professionals think logistics rings true, be it in the military or in humanitarian operations.

This mindset has served me well especially when carrying out contingency planning for the likes of possible relocation or planning a convoy into high and very high-risk areas.

From a training perspective any training I or the team provide has the key learning outcome that it is there to reduce the risk to a staff member in either safety or security.

A key facet of this is to make the training relatable to the security and operating environment on the ground. Once personnel see that it is relatable and of benefit to them and also enables operations it makes delivery of this training enjoyable and worthwhile.



Daniel Sheerin was a security officer as part of his protective detail, during a visit of UN Secretary General Guterres to the Ukrainian city of Bucha in April 2022.



On patrol with the CIMIC team to a remote village in southern Chad in 2009.

MISCONCEPTIONS OVER UN SECURITY ROLE?

The two misconceptions I have seen are that being a military person (officer/NCO/soldier) does not necessarily translate into being a security officer in the UN. The other is that the UN is such a massive system that some DF personnel might not appreciate that there is a lot more outside the peacekeeping operations. However, to be fair to DF personnel, I find the view is narrower or skewed a little through the lens of 'blue helmet peacekeeping' when I chat to civilian friends or acquaintances back home.

This is natural as this peacekeeping is part of the fabric of Ireland now and we are justifiably proud of our peacekeeping tradition across the world. I would posit that it is also of benefit to me when I travel and engage with other nationalities and UN entities. Many have dealt with Irish peacekeeping forces and are always complimentary about how we have operated on these missions. Regarding the first point I mentioned about being a security officer in the UN, military personnel are trained to take on or manage a threat(s).

A key tenet of UN security policy (which is separate

from UN peacekeeping policy) is that the policy cannot manage the threat as we don't have offensive forces, we can only manage the risks emanating from threats. Therefore, one of the first things personnel coming from the military need to do is appreciate this approach and understand security risk management (SRM).

The UN SRM concept is very formalised and prescriptive. The idea is that when risk measures are introduced into the UN System in a country, they are applicable to all UN entities or agencies operating there and brings uniformity regarding safety and security protocols and procedures. In Ukraine we have 27 UN entities operating here.

ADVICE FOR SERVING OR FORMER OFFICERS

For anyone looking to upskill within the area of security risk management, there are plenty of courses out there. All UN posts require a minimum of a Bachelor's Degree and experience in the security field. Even with a degree I recommend completing a Masters in a relevant field. I completed an LLM in international humanitarian law and conflict and a post-grad diploma in French in the

University of Galway before I left the DF.

One doesn't have to follow my educational path but there are plenty of security, defence, SRM and international relations-based Masters degree courses that can be completed via distance learning or part-time. An added value is to undertake some language courses too as many jobs in this area are found in Francophone and Arabic speaking countries.

I've studied the Ukrainian language. Although the working language here in the UN is English, it's invaluable to be able to converse with security forces at checkpoints or in towns for example. It shows a mark of respect and cultural awareness. It also makes ordering food and a beer much easier! Within the DF I recommend completing the CIMIC course, or the likes of the human rights course at the UN School in the Curragh.

CURRENT OUTLOOK FOR WHO IN UKRAINE

The WHO remains steadfast in its operations in Ukraine. One cannot predict the outcome or length of the current conflict. My job has been very rewarding, having worked with a great team and in a great organisation. Colleagues in the likes of our health programmes and operations are doing a fantastic job in delivering to the most vulnerable.

This is often executed in highly dangerous and

stressful environments. Having a security team that can enable these activities brings great satisfaction to myself and the team and I know that it is appreciated by our programme colleagues.

This is a slightly abridged version of the interview first published in the Summer 2023 edition of SIGNAL Journal (the official magazine of RACO (Representative Association of Commissioned Officers), by kind permission of RACO.



SALTHILL HOTEL
PROMENADE GALWAY

★★★★



If you're getting into the holiday mood now that Spring has arrived, you'll be pleased to find out that we've just launched a 2-night break by the sea offer. There's no better spot than Salthill if you want beautiful walks on the promenade and beach with panoramic views of Galway Bay and the Clare Hills. The beach is literally 33 steps from our front door (yes, we counted), and we have 2 pools, a sauna, a steam room, and a jacuzzi...so something for everyone to enjoy!






CONTACT US

☎ (091) 522 711 ✉ reservations@salthillhotel.com 🌐 Salthill Hotel.com