

The 38th (Irish) Infantry Battalion: last unit in action in the Congo.

Dr James McCafferty DSM, BA (Hons), PhD

The following article, kindly provided by its author, refers to the action of Captain Tom Boyle's Heavy Mortar Troop in 1962, serving with ONUC. The article was published in the September 2017 edition of An Cosantóir.

Three members of the Heavy Mortar Troop were subsequently awarded the DSM: Capt Tom Boyle 4 Fd Arty Regt, Sgt John Quirke 4 Fd Arty Regt and Cpl Bobby Allen 4 Fd Arty Regt.

You must understand therefore, that there are two ways of fighting.

By law - or by force.

The first way is natural to man, the second to beasts.

But as the first way often proves inadequate one needs must have recourse to the second.

So a prince must understand how to make nice use of the beast and the man.

Niccolo Machiavelli. 'The Prince'.

The 38th (Irish) Infantry Battalion (38 IrBatt) was the last Irish unit to engage in combat operations with UN forces in the Republic of the Congo. Formed on 1 November 1962, commanded by Lt. Col. P. J. Delaney, Military College, the battalion began its departure on 7 November 1962. Transiting through Congo's capital, Leopoldville, 38 IrBatt moved to Elisabethville, Katanga and by 18 November were on station at Camp Prince Leopold Farm. 38 IrBatt arrived in Elisabethville at a time when all road and rail routes into the city had been blockaded by Katangese Gendarmerie: but, with the city and its Luano airport remaining under UN control. Freedom of movement was thus denied to UN forces, with air transport being their only means of logistical support: for their part, UN forces had placed roadblocks on all routes into Elisabethville.

Opposing 38 IrBatt (650 all-ranks) and other UN forces in Elisabethville, were Katangese gendarmerie forces around the perimeter of the city and the airport; estimated at some 3,000 all-ranks. Armoured elements of the gendarmerie in Elisabethville was reckoned at six armoured cars – of *Staghound* marque - each armed with one 37 mm cannon, one 0.30 inch and one 0.50 inch Browning machine-gun. The dispositions of Katangese armoured vehicles is not given in 38 IrBatt unit history. The Katangese gendarmerie was armed mainly with FN 7.62 mm SL rifles and light machine-guns of the same calibre and make. They were also equipped with 60 and 81 mm mortars, and some 57 mm anti-tank weapons. The Katangese air force was estimated as

having between thirty-two and thirty-eight aircraft, of which eight were *Fouga* jet-trainers – equipped with machine-guns and capable of carrying light bombs. The dispositions of these aircraft are not given in 38 IrBatt unit history.

Other UN forces in Elisabethville were: Indian – one battalion from each of 4th Rajputani Rifles, 2/5 Ghurkhas and 4 Madras Rifles; Ethiopian – 4th Ethiopian battalion, and Tunisian – 14th Tunisian battalion. The weaponry of these UN forces is not recorded, nor is the strength of UN air assets in Elisabethville.

In their base at Camp Prince Leopold Farm, 38 IrBatt were engaged in ground and helicopter reconnaissance, trenching works at the camp and on-going weapon training. The establishment of 38 IrBatt included a troop of 120 mm heavy mortars – the largest calibre weapon used by the Irish army in the Congo. Remarkably, and almost without exception, the personnel of this mortar troop were drawn from the same parent unit in Ireland – the 4th Field Artillery Regiment – then stationed at Mullingar, Co. Westmeath.

The tense, blockaded situation in Elisabethville persisted until Christmas Eve, 1962 when Katangese gendarmerie opened fire on UN positions: later on that same day, a UN helicopter was shot down, causing the deaths of six members of the Indian UN contingent. 38 IrBatt went on alert, but no further incidents occurred until the night of 27/28 December 1962, when heavy small-arms and mortar fire erupted from Katangese positions: 38 IrBatt took up defensive positions and doubled-manned all guard posts. Simultaneously, water and electricity supplies to the Irish camp at Prince Leopold Farm were cut off.

On 28 December 1962, the President of Katanga, Moise Tshombe, made an abortive attempt to stop firing by his own forces: this attempt failed, and Indian UN troops in brigade strength commenced a series of attacks in Elisabethville. The 120 mm heavy mortar troop of 38 IrBatt was detached to the Indian UN brigade during this phase of operations - directed against radio communication centres and Katangese gendarmerie positions.

In addition, two (Irish) Ford armoured cars were detached to the Ethiopian UN battalion, who were engaged in opening the road from Elisabethville towards – and subsequent assault on – the town of Kipushi. This town lies on the border with Zambia, about twenty-five kilometres southwest of Elisabethville. The strategic significance of the assault on Kipushi is not recorded:

however, the Ordnance Report in 38 IrBatts unit history details the discovery and destruction of 'eight hundred and sixty eight aerial rocket bombs' found at Kipushi airfield. No reference is made to any Katangese military aircraft being found at this airfield: nevertheless, it may be deduced that the action against Kipushi had the strategic aim of capturing the airfield and any military equipment there. The infantry role of 38 IrBatt in the attack was to act as a reserve and to reinforce the Ethiopian troops. The drive towards, and the subsequent assault on, Kipushi began on 29 December 1962 and concluded on the morning of 30 December 1962 when 38 IrBatt passed through Ethiopian lines, advanced on Kipushi, and 'Having met a truce party about one mile short of the town, the battalion entered the town peacefully'. Then, and in several weeks following, 38 IrBatt – supported by their armoured car group (less one section with Ethiopian battalion) – occupied Kipushi. There, elements of 38 IrBatt were variously involved in attending to the needs of many refugees, maintaining law and order and taking-over abandoned Katangese Gendarmerie stores, weapons, ammunition, mines and various types of explosives.

The 120 mm heavy mortar troop, which had been detached, to the Indian UN brigade, was in continuing action with them in Elisabethville before moving to support the Ethiopian battalion on an attack on a Katangese Gendarmerie strongpoint known as 'Simba Hill' en route to Kipushi. At the conclusion of this latter phase of action, 38 IrBatt heavy-mortar troop supported their own battalion as they closed on Kipushi. Following the Kipushi operation, the heavy mortar troop was moved back to the Indian UN brigade as they assaulted Jadotville and then Kolwezi, Katanga. This meant that the men who manned the 120 mm mortars were in action on a continuous basis from 28 December 1962 to 21 January 1963. The unit history of 38 IrBatt describes the effect of this heavy mortar fire thus:

The devastating effect of the 120 mm mortar on the Katangese gendarmerie has been borne out at all stages of the operation. The efficiency of the 38 Battalion Heavy Mortar Troop and its application to duty has been evidenced in the many public statements and citations given by all concerned.

In this period of action, 38 IrBatt heavy mortar troop fired a total of 225 mortar bombs: by way of comparison, in a shoot at Glen of Imaal in February 2017, 2 Artillery Regiment fired a total of 150 bombs.¹

The report of the heavy mortar troop in the 38 IrBatt unit history lists a number of conclusions – clearly intended as guidance for future operations, on the basis of 'lessons learned'. The main points made were the importance of highly skilled crews and that each gun-towing vehicle should

¹ Source: - RSM Noel O'Callaghan, 2 Arty Reg

be capable of also carrying ammunition – the Land Rover vehicles used were not powerful enough to tow the weapon, carry crews and ammunition also.

Armoured Car Group 38 IrBatt, reporting on its activities, mentioned the good condition of the Ford armoured cars which they had taken-over from 37 IrBatt. But the report continues by excoriating their poor radio communications, due to want of adequate supply of radio batteries.

The report goes on to narrate that in the early days of service in Elisabethville, the Armoured Car Group of 38 IrBatt carried out daily patrols on the three principal routes to and from the city to Luano airport, Elisabethville. Then, at the end of December 1962, when ‘the 38 IrBatt took the field on active service’, one section (two armoured cars) of the armoured car group was detached for operations with the Ethiopian UN battalion. The remainder of the Armoured Car Group was with the leading elements of 38 IrBatt and with those elements:

This leading section (of armoured car group) actively engaged the enemy on the move from SIMBA HILL to KAFUBA BRIDGE and led the advance of the battalion into KIPUSHI (sic).

Regrettably, this armoured car group report does not give any details on how they ‘actively engaged the enemy’: however, 38 IrBatt statistics on ammunition expenditure notes that just under 17, 000 rounds of .303 in. Vickers ammunition was fired. 38 IrBatt unit history does not detail infantry action on this advance on Kipushi, nor the use of Vickers machine-guns by infantry elements. The operational orders issued for the period of offensive action from late December 1962 to early January 1963 instruct that on the advance to Kipushi ‘Armoured Car Group will lead the advance and search by fire both sides of the road’. It is, therefore, reasonable to deduce that possibly all of the 17, 000 rounds of Vickers ammunition expended by 38 IrBatt was fired by Vickers on the Ford armoured cars – a considerable amount: taking the rate of fire at 500 rounds per minute for these guns, a total of some thirty-four minutes of actual firing time may be adduced.

By 11 February 1963, all of 38 IrBatt had moved to Kolwezi, Katanga. There, they were engaged in patrols in and about Kolwezi and its approaches: they detached an infantry company to Kolwezi airport. As the Katangese Gendarmerie had capitulated at end January 1963, the central government’s *Armée Nationale Congolaise* (ANC) had placed registration teams in Kolwezi in early February 1963, and 38 IrBatt ‘co-operated with the ANC teams in enlisting ex-gendarmerie who wished to join the ANC’. 38 IrBatt remained in Kolwezi, engaged in a peaceful routine of patrolling and guarding activity, until their repatriation in the period 24 April to 7 May 1963.

38 IrBatt had engaged in aggressive military action - with their heavy mortar troop and armoured car group especially committed. Using the information given in the 38 IrBatt unit history on ammunition expenditure as a crude measure of actual military action; in small arms ammunition 38 IrBatt expended 16, 000 rounds. This was about one-tenth of similar ammunition expenditure of 35 IrBatt in 1961.

38 IrBatt, acting in support of the Ethiopian UN battalion, would have expended this ammunition in this operation and in the advance of 38 IrBatt towards Kipushi, this town having capitulated before direct assault. The absence of detail on infantry action by 38 IrBatt is regrettable, as consequently it cannot be compared with other Irish units in action.

Whilst in Kipushi, 38 IrBatt armoured car group recovered from Union Minière workshops at (Kipushi) mines one of the armoured cars that had been lost in the Battle of Jadotville in September 1961. And, in Kolwezi, 38 IrBatt occupied the camp that had been used to hold 'A' Coy 35 IrBatt as prisoners-of-war. In November 1962 as 37 & 38 IrBatts were on rotation, an officer from 38 IrBatt armoured car group was one of party of four (with three officers from 37 IrBatt) who recovered – near Tundula, Katanga - the remains of Trooper Anthony Browne, missing after the Niamba Ambush on 8 November 1960.

Irish newspapers reported on actions involving 38 IrBatt, but not in the depth at which they covered the actions in Elisabethville and Jadotville in 1961/2. The *Irish Independent*, on 29 December 1962, carried a report on Irish troop activity as 'No reports on Irish involved in Katanga fighting' – but, on 31 December 1962 it reported 'Details of Irish attack on Simba Hill'. The *Irish Times* was somewhat more informative: on 29 December 1962 it reported 'Heavy fighting in Katanga: Irish troops committed to action'. Again, on 31 December 1962 and on 2 January 1963 the *Irish Times* carried reports on 'Irish troops capture Simba Hill and take Kipushi unopposed' and, 'Major UN advance in Katanga: Indian and Irish troops within 15 miles of Jadotville'.

The part played by 38 IrBatt in this UN operation that brought about the final capitulation of Katangese forces in 1963 did not go un-noted by Irish print media.

Contributor's biography

Dr. James McCafferty DSM, BA (Hons), PhD served in the Congo with 34, 36 & 39 IrBatts. His PhD thesis '*Political and military aspects of the Irish Army's service with UN forces in the Congo 1960-64*' is based on research using sources in Ireland, Belgium, Britain, France, Portugal, USA and USSR. A copy of his thesis is lodged in Defence Force Archives.