

AT THE BEGINNING

Lt General P.A Mulcahy.(1897 –1987)

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I wish to express my pleasure on being invited to contribute to the commemorative Artillery issue of An Cosantoir, but hasten to add that I hope speaking of events which took place 50 years ago, I will be forgiven any lapses of memory which might give offence.

Before dealing with the actual formation of the Corps, I think it is necessary to set the scene prior to that event, so that the reader will have some idea of the many difficulties that had to be overcome.

Prior to the 11th July 1921, this country was occupied and in a state of war: there were Flying Columns throughout the country. I was in North Tipperary with one of those Columns. The Truce came and we were given various assignments, e.g. I was one of a number of officers who took over the various Barracks from the British, Bin for example. That in itself would be an interesting story, but has nothing to do with Artillery.

I had no instructions to do this, but I thought that it would be very useful if the body of men which I had were trained in Signals, or I suppose a better word, communications, something I was particularly interested in. We were there several months; then the Civil War came on and, of course, we all took our part in that.

One day I was instructed to report to GHQ which was in Portobello Barracks at the time, where I was interviewed by the then Chief-of-Staff, Lt Gen Sean McMahon. He informed me that they were about to form an Artillery

Corps and that I was being put in charge! I remember saying: "But, Sir, I know nothing about artillery." "Neither do any of us", he said, "but still you are going to be in charge of it." He continued: "I will nominate two officers and you can pick the remainder yourself and when that is completed, submit an organisation."

I went back to Portlaoise to start selecting. We had a lot of officers at the time and many were unwilling to sign up as regulars and stay in the army, but fortunately there were a few whom I had selected who were willing to stay, namely Paddy Maher (later Col), Tim Finlay (later Comdt - Jumping Team) and Ned O'Leary (later Comdt). So with these three, I set out for Dublin and was instructed to set up my Headquarters in Islandbridge Barracks, now Clancy Barracks, which at the time was mainly stores and a little ordnance, but it was a very disorganised place and not at all suited to our purpose, as we later found. Nevertheless, we went, got ourselves offices and 'dug in'.

"Guns"

I was soon informed that "Guns", they weren't even referred to as Artillery, were distributed throughout the Commands - there was one or perhaps two field guns in each Command, and these, with their crews, had been ordered to report to Islandbridge Barracks.

When they arrived Col Maher and I examined all the officers, most of them we returned to their units as they did not want to be Regular Gunner Officers and I agreed with some that they would be better employed elsewhere! Ultimately we finished up with very few officers but with sixty to seventy stout-hearted prospective gunners - the formation of a 'small' battery. I was a Major I/C, Ned O'Leary a Comdt and Adjutant Col Maher was a Captain and Assistant Adjutant and for the time being Comdt D. Mackey was Quartermaster, but ultimately he resigned and we got Capt R.J. Callanan, now Maj Gen (Retd) who remained with us for a long time.

Islandbridge, as I said before, was most unsuitable, consisting mainly of stores; there was no space for training, we had horses and most of our training was horse-riding which we had to learn properly. Most of us could ride - we could farm horses - but now we had to ride properly; there was no space for this in Islandbridge.

New Quarters

McKee Barracks was then occupied by the Garda Síochána who were being moved to their present quarters. Knowing that I was dissatisfied with our accommodation, I was informed by Headquarters that McKee Barracks was available to me. I went up there, met Gen O'Duffy, Garda Commissioner, and the transfer was arranged. It was a wonderful change which provided us with great training facilities. We stayed for nearly two years until I was ordered in March 1925 to occupy what was an old Artillery Barracks in Kildare. The Gardai were there also, but they were being moved and we were to take over. We moved lock, stock and barrel down to Magee Barracks. One little thing which I remember now with a smile. There was an Infantry Platoon on guard in Magee Barracks and we kept them for about a year and a half or two years until somebody "caught on". We had to supply our own guards from then on. We thought that was a great imposition to ask Gunners to do. However, we did. That brings us down to Kildare.



Funeral of an artillery officer, 1925, Military Archives

Kildare

One thing that Col Maher and I were most interested in was to get somebody to train us. We weren't trained Gunners. So we got a Training Officer, a Capt Harry Froud St. Ledger Caulfield - he was employed for about three months. Then we got Capt Gary Brennan. Brennan was a fine type, a gentleman, and he gently taught us a certain amount of gunnery. But we were eager and soon surpassed his limited knowledge. Not his fault. He gave us what he knew. However, in 1926 a military mission was sent to America and included Major Charlie Trodden (decd) who was with us at the time. He did an American Gunnery Course and was later invaluable to us. I took the opportunity of suggesting that we send someone across to the English Gunnery School and I was told to go myself, for a month, on a Battery Commanders Course. There I met officers all about my own age and all of whom had seen service in Ireland. I was wondering how they'd react to me. I needn't have worried, I found their only interest in Ireland was they were terribly sorry to miss cheap hunting, fishing and shooting and hadn't the slightest interest in politics. They ran a very excellent course; suited me fine and I learned enough

to come back and suggest other ideas. The principal suggestion was that we avail of the facilities of the Long Gunnery Staff Course, which was a year's job. The first two officers to undergo this course were Lt Denis Coady (later Lt Col decd) and Dan Farrell (later Comdt Retd). That was the opening, but from that on we tried to send one every year; we didn't get away with that, but we sent one periodically and they got wonderful training, brought back very good methods and very good technical instruction.

The School and The Glen of Imaal

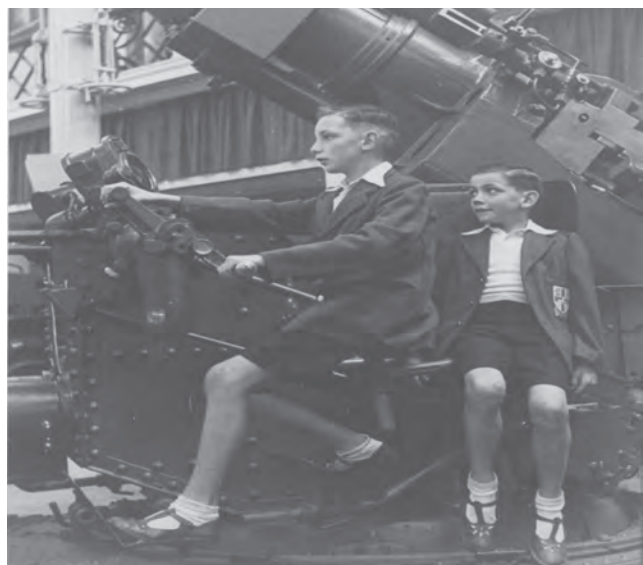
The School carried on in Kildare and we opened up the Glen of Imaal Range. The Glen of Imaal had been a British Camp but during the early days our Army formed a "Salvage Corps" known to us all as the "Wreckers", but we didn't realise what wreckers could do until we went to Glen Imaal and found a lovely camp levelled, even water pipes broken, houses torn asunder. Luckily we had an Engineer Officer, a Belgian, Col Naus, I think he was a Capt Naus, but we always called him Colonel Naus because he told us he had been a Colonel in the Belgian Army, and who were we to say he wasn't. But whatever he may have been he was an excellent engineer; we gave him men and he put Coolmoney Camp back in excellent condition for us. It improved over the years and we enjoyed wonderful facilities - we had stables for horses, gun parks for guns, we had huts for men - at first we had only canvas, but we had Coolmoney House as the Officers Mess.

We went to the Glen regularly but it took us a long time to get ammunition. We had guns and we had knowledge but we couldn't start shooting practices until the ammunition arrived - eventually it did. I remember the morning the first shoot was carried out. The first round was fired at 10 o'clock on 1st September 1925, and was fired by myself to ceremoniously open it up. From there we continued to develop; anti-tank shooting became important. I remember I brought back a description of an anti-tank range from Larkhill and helped by the O/C Engineers, Comdt Jack Kineen (later Col), we built a range. It consisted of a Ball pulled by two horses and we used to have great fun with that; you'd have to see it to believe it could be possible, but that was the first Anti-Tank Range. Improvements came every year to both the range and the guns. The guns then were 18 Pounders, Marks 1 and 11.

The AA

One day we were told there were two 3 inch 20 cwt mobile and two 3 inch 20 cwt semi mobile anti-aircraft guns in Islandbridge (they had been there for a long time and nobody took notice of them). I remember getting a phone call on a Friday. It was from GHQ and that in itself was an event at the time.

The message was that I was to form an anti-aircraft battery immediately. I laughed at this when I heard it and hung up. I went next door to Comdt Paddy Maher, as he was then, and he too was amused at this order, as it was, we were short fifty men on our establishment. On Saturday morning I got another phone call to know was the battery formed yet. I said: "It certainly isn't. I haven't the men." Anyway I was informed I had better get it done immediately; I took no action. Monday morning I was rung again, a different voice this time, a friend, and he said: "Paddy, have you formed that battery yet?" I said; "I haven't and I have no intention of doing it." "Well I'm telling you, you'd better get it done today", said the friend, "and I'll be ringing you this afternoon and you'd better be able to tell me that the battery has been formed," and he hung up.



3.7 Inch Anti Aircraft gun on display in the RDS 1945, Military Archives

I discussed the matter with Comdt Paddy Maher and we decided to appoint Lt Maurice McCarthy who had done an anti-aircraft course and Lt Jimmy Dolan as his 2 I/C. We sent them to Islandbridge Barracks; we had no idea how they were going to get the guns down or where they would bring them to but I said: "Ye start bringing them down and we will find a place for them". We couldn't house them in Kildare; we had no buildings big enough, so we got permission to take over stables in Plunkett Barracks, Curragh Camp. When the guns came we directed them to Plunkett Barracks, we attached a few men under command of Lt Maurice McCarthy and so the battery was formed. Later my friend rang in the afternoon and I said: "Yes the battery has been formed; they have an Officer Commanding, Lt Maurice McCarthy, and they are stationed in Plunkett Barracks, Curragh Camp.". "Good", he said. The following day the mystery was solved. There was a Dail question down for an answer on Tuesday by the Minister for Defence and the question was: "It is a fact that there are guns - anti-aircraft guns - rusting in Islandbridge Barracks and there is no unit in the army to look after them", and the Minister was able to stand up and say that "the answer to both questions is in the negative." From there on the AA never looked back.

Change of Appointment

The Corps at this time was a very happy and efficient one. As a matter of fact, for it's size and the number of officers in it, I don't think there was another unit in the army to compare with it. The officers had been through a great many courses as had the NCOs and Men. Now I'm talking about my own baby and every mother thinks her own is marvellous but I do think they were damn good and I hated leaving them and I did in 1935 to command the Air Corps. They were well disciplined - no doubt about that no doubt whatsoever. As a matter of fact I was often criticised by my senior friends in various parts of the army, of being too much of a disciplinarian - too much of a "spurs and Whips" but we had the kind of discipline that was not in many of the units of the army at that time and the fellows lapped it up and liked it and it made them better soldiers and much happier soldiers than some troops in other units who weren't so disciplined.

Mechanisation

We loved our horses and we hated parting with them. I never appreciated what a difference their going could make until I came back to the Corps in 1942 to take over from Col Paddy Maher, who had retired to run Shannon Airport. It was during this time as Director that full mechanisation came. I got a real surprise when we were arranging to go to the Glen for a practice shoot. I had Maj Gen Hally in, he was probably a Comdt or a Major then, to make arrangements for the move. I said: "I suppose we'll move on Friday as usual, rest Saturday and Sunday, shoot Monday." "Oh no, Sir we leave at 9 o'clock Monday morning and we shoot at II!" In my time the horses and men had to be rested. That really showed the huge change that had taken place during my sojourn with the Air Corps.

The Corps Sports

This was a two-day event and a wonderful time for everybody. The horses added to the occasion by providing such events as jumping; tent pegging and rivalry between batteries and sections was ever present. Sometimes we used to inveigle Supply and Transport to pit their horses against us. One occasion I remember, I tied with the S&T man, so there was a jump off. I was riding a lovely grey mare with a long tail, a grand jumper. In the jump off, as I was going into the "in-and-out" (quite a new thing then but quite common in Ballsbridge and other places now) I knew she was wrong; I simply threw the reins at her and said: "You go on, you know more about this jump than I do" and she got through perfectly. I won the competition, and when handing over the mare to the groom, Oliver Hagens, I hadn't noticed that he was rather happy. I patted the mare and I said: "She's a great mare Hagens." "She is, sir", says he. "She won in spite of you". But they were wonderful sports. We had a musical ride which was introduced and trained by Sgt Major "Peggy" O'Neill. It took six months to train for this but it was marvellous to watch; we considered the Royal Tournament in the halfpenny place compared with ours! We built up a tradition of football and hurling that will be hard to surpass but in the final analysis I think we were better footballers.

The Blue Hussars

I must not let the opportunity pass without mentioning the Blue Hussars. They were established to provide an escort for the Papal Nuncio coming to the Congress of 1932. We were a “natural” for the job, as we had sufficient horses and riders. Col Dan Collins was in charge and he had with him Maj Gen Pat Hally and Lt Col Bill Donnelly among others and they were all fitted out in this wonderful Blue Regalia, the Busby adding another two feet of grandeur and stature. While everyone in the Escort could ride there was much rehearsal for the ceremony. I remember on one rehearsal, they had to pull up in the grounds of a hotel in Dun Laoghaire where they were to wait for some people to come. Lt Col Bill Donnelly was one of the group. They naturally attracted a lot of attention and Bill in particular. There was a group of priests looking on and suddenly one of them exclaimed: “By God, ‘tis Bill Donnelly”, everything became natural then. The atmosphere of awe and splendour was lost for it was only Bill Donnelly from Bin!

One other incident I remember which arose from a rehearsal of the Blue Hussars for the Congress in 1932. We used to practice about 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning and were coming back from Dun Laoghaire and had arrived at Merrion Square. It was a slippery morning and I should have had more sense. I was riding a horse known as “Big Tom”. I reined “Big Tom” and he fell. Fortunately he knew me as I knew him. When he fell he felt my leg under him. He momentarily lifted himself to enable me to get my leg out. Horse sensitivity was often very touching. If I may digress for a moment. I can recall many a tough character crying when his charge was being disposed of by the Remount Officer. The horses themselves knew their time had come, we had difficulty getting them out of Barracks, some of them we literally had to force out. We didn’t like it but we had to. The Blue Hussars were eventually mechanised too - a cavalry motor cycle escort took over.

Guns and Howitzers

Before I left the Corps I was most anxious that we should have some Howitzers. The Secretary of the Department and I discussed the matter and it was decided that I should explain to the Minister why we needed Howitzers. We had a Minister at the time whom I knew fairly well and I knew he wouldn’t be the slightest bit interested in the technical aspects, so at the interview the Secretary said: “Tell the Minister the principal difference between an 18 Pdr and a 4.5 Howitzer.” “Well sir; to make it clear, I think you know that it was 18 Pdrs that were used against the Four Courts. It was useless using 18 Pdrs against the great walls of the Four Courts. Now if you had Howitzers with their high trajectory you would have taken the Four Courts in twenty minutes”. “Ah be God”, says he, “we must get some of them.”



4.5inch howitzers in Phoenix Park, Military Archives