



Field training is a high-risk activity

A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH

The Defence Forces has become the first State organisation to have its safety management systems validated in an audit carried out by the State Claims Agency. Mary Anne Kenny spoke to those involved to find out what the audit entailed.

The Defence Forces (DF) has become the first State organisation to have its safety management systems validated in an audit carried out by the State Claims Agency (SCA). The independent audit, which was carried out throughout 2006, is based on best practice standards such as OHSAS 18001, HS(G)65, AIRMIC and AS/NZS 4360:24. Certificates of compliance were awarded on 27 February, verifying that proper health and safety management structures are in place throughout the Defence Forces.

"The audit involved an examination of the safety management systems in Defence Forces headquarters, each of the six Defence Forces formations of East, West, South, the Defence Forces Training Centre (Curragh Camp), the Naval Service and Air Corps and in 16 units selected by the auditors from throughout the Defence Forces," explained Comdt Bob Corbet, staff officer, health and safety.

This was the first time that DF safety systems had been audited. Over the last few years, the Forces had put in place various initiatives to improve its safety management systems and it was felt that these would satisfy the SCA requirements. "Firstly, we



At the presentation of health and safety compliance certificates to various DF units, Armn Billy Galligan's photo shows (l-r): Col Brendan Farrelly (DDFT); Comdt Bob Corbett (DF H&S Offr); Gemma D'Arcy, lead investigator, SCA; Col Paul Pakenham (DFHQ); Maj Gen Dermot Earley (D COS Sp); Adrian Kearns (director, SCA); Brig Gen Pat O_Sullivan (GOC DFTC); Pat Kirwan (head of risk and operations, SCA); Brig Gen Chris Moore (A COS Sp) and Lt Col ??

computerised our accident and incident reporting and administrative systems and that facilitated the gathering of accident and incident information, which in turn facilitated accident investigation," explained Corbet. "We wanted to be in a position to comply with the 2005 legislation before it actually came into force.

"We also looked at systems of risk assessment within the barracks and had that in place by the start of 2005. Then we analysed the training operations, which is a very different process." Garrison activities comprise everything that happens within the barracks and include accommodation, catering, workshops such as transport and engineering, IT and signals equipment.

"Garrison activities are very different to field training and more controllable from a safety point of view," Corbet continued. "The legislation applies completely and in full within the garrison situation, and we're expected to maintain exactly the same standards as other workplaces. With our training, however, it's slightly dif-

ferent because we're the experts in military field training. There are no defined standards set down in ministerial regulations for those activities and we've certain exemptions from the legislation for certain activities.

"Field training is very different to the activities carried out within the barracks. Because of the nature of the operations we can be called upon to undertake, it's necessary for us to have robust training but we still have to manage that and carry it out in a safe manner," said Corbett.

After examining and updating its safety systems, the Defence Forces hoped that this improved risk management approach would meet the SCA criteria. Bearing in mind that the 2005 legislation emphasises continuous improvement and the role of health and safety management, the DF formalised its briefing and reporting procedures and standardised them throughout the Forces. Monthly briefings are now held on health and safety issues, and standard monthly workplace inspection reports and quarterly unit commanders' reports are also

drawn up.

"We also developed formalised accident investigation teams, which comprise both health and safety professionals and experts in the relevant field," Corbet continued. "For example, in the event of an engineering accident, we'd involve a military engineer. If there was a road traffic accident, we'd have a transport technical officer. These team investigations aim to prevent recurrences on foot of their investigation reports. We issue risk advisory notices that state correct procedures and, after these are distributed, we then require confirmation that the right processes have been implemented."

AUDIT PROCESS

Once all these systems were in place, the State Claims Agency began its audit, which took almost a year. Pat Kirwan, head of risk and operations with the SCA, was one of the auditors, along with Gemma D'Arcy, lead risk manager. The State Claims Agency was established under the National Treasury Management Agency

(Amendment) Act 2000. "Our remit includes the provision of risk management advices to the State authorities in order to prevent claims against the State," explained Kirwan.

"With larger State authorities like the Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána, the Dept of Agriculture and the Irish Prison Service, we establish Risk Management Liaison Groups, so we can work in conjunction and consultation with them on risk management issues. We've a very claims-focused view."

When the SCA began its audit of the Defence Forces, it looked at the main issues which it felt could lead to large numbers of claims. "We then looked at the management process within the Defence Forces because, in order to have advices and recommendations adopted and effect real change, the systems for managing change and managing risk also had to be examined," Kirwan continued.

The next step was to carry out a gap analysis in conjunction with the Defence Forces' Risk Management Liaison Group. This includes the Defence Forces' risk manager who is also a brigadier general, the director of Defence Forces training and the director of administration. "These are people who have influence within the organisation and can have real impact and input into safety management. We carried out a gap analysis in conjunction with the Defence Forces and ascertained that the safety systems and resources were in place to effect change," said Kirwan. "Because of our remit, the SCA could provide an independent view."

According to Kirwan, the Defence Forces lead the way in health and safety risk management. "We see risk management systems accreditations as the way forward; it's very much in keeping with the requirements of the 2005 Act and good risk management and claims management practice," he said. "The SCA audit system is based on the OHSAS 18001, HS(G)65, AIRMIC and AS/NZS 4360:24 systems and has similar criteria. We're experts in



The Air Corps was examined as part of the State Claims Agency audit

these areas and we can say to the Defence Forces, as an independent body, that we feel that its systems meet best practice standards. The audit is a way of driving improvement, getting people interested and awarding achievement as well."

The audit took the best part of a year because the SCA auditors had to sample the Forces' key functions that impact on health and safety such as training, operations, procurement, engineering, buildings and the input of senior officers. The SCA audited the safety function in all the formations within the Forces, including the three army brigades, the Defence Forces Training Centre (Curragh), the Air Corps, the Naval Service and the Defence Forces' Headquarters. "We then sampled at least two but usually three units on the ground within each of the formations, so a total of 16 units were audited," explained Kirwan.

The audit examined safety policy and documentation; training; objective setting and planning; methods of monitoring and checking on progress; and methodologies for audit and review of systems. Essentially, it validated that the Defence Forces has in place the necessary systems to ensure continuous improvement in occupational health and safety standards.

REDUCTION IN CLAIMS

Since the SCA began its operations on 3 December 2001, the number of employers liability claims reported to the Agency has decreased by approximately 90 per cent. On the public liability side – accidents to members of the public coming onto State authority areas, including DF lands – the decrease is 60 per cent.

"Of course, there's a general reduction in claims across all industry and business activity, but with regard to claims against the State, it's very significant," said Kirwan. The SCA's employers liability and public liability claims portfolio reports that 40 per cent of claims are from State employees. Of these, 48 per cent are by members or ex-members of the

Defence Forces, reflecting the large numbers of Defence Forces personnel (including the Reserves) and the higher risks attaching to their activities.

As part of the audit, the SCA highlights issues and, where possible, suggests solutions. "But even before we started the audit, there were many excellent programmes ongoing in the Defence Forces," Kirwan continued. "We then gave some impetus and some direction around the claims and risk management functions.

"The improvement in the Defence Forces risk management is having a significant impact in terms of the number of claims and incidents. The Defence Forces now has the systems in place – especially given the fact that it's a large and complex organisation –

were scattered all over the country in places like Cork, Longford, the Curragh, Athlone and Dublin."

The Defence Forces got the results of the audit just before Christmas, which was a relief to Corbet as he was due to leave for a six-month tour of duty to Kosovo in early April. "It was great to know the outcome before I headed off," he said. "The criteria are quite strict and it was very satisfying to have our risk management systems recognised and accredited. There was quite a bit of work involved in it and it took a lot of commitment, and it was a lot of work for the auditors, too. We really appreciated their feedback."

The SCA will return to the Defence Forces this year to carry out a maintenance audit. This time, the auditors



that should lead to continuous improvement."

"Initially, we looked at the possibility of an external audit but, because we're scattered all over the country and do an awful lot of different functions even within the one barracks, that was just unfeasible," explained Corbet. "There could be eight or ten discrete units such as artillery, infantry, transport and engineering and they all do very different work. It would have been financially prohibitive to get in a commercial auditor to examine the Defence Forces. As it was, the 16 units audited by the SCA

will examine a smaller sample of functions but will look at some in more detail.

"We got nothing but the utmost co-operation from DF personnel over the course of the audit. They've taken a very pro-active approach," said Pat Kirwan. "After dealing with the Defence Forces for a period of time, we recognised that it was at the stage where, with a certain amount of work, it would very quickly meet the best practice international standards. When the Defence Forces sets about doing something, it tends to be done correctly," he concluded.