

AT AN age when most young men fret over school exams, finding a job, or girl trouble, 17-year-old John Gorman faced far more pressing issues: not being killed 8,000 km from home. The baby-faced private from Castlepollard, Westmeath, was part of a U.N. peacekeeping force sent to the Republic of the Congo, which had descended into civil war.

The men of Company A, 35th Irish Infantry Battalion, a unit as green as the shamrock patches on their wool uniforms, soon found themselves outnumbered twenty to one against a well-armed enemy led by battle-hardened mercenaries.

The 'Congo Crisis' became Ireland's first-ever international military deployment, staged during the height of the Cold War when the world dangerously teetered on the brink of nuclear ruin.

In addition to the sweltering, humid conditions and being saddled with antiquated weapons, Company A operated without any reliable intelligence network and was prohibited from using force unless acting in self-defence.

In other words, like sending a blindfolded fighter into the ring with one arm tied behind his back.

However, despite the long odds, the Irish would prove their mettle, channeling the same fighting spirit of their countrymen who triumphed at Waterloo, and a century later, defeated the largest empire the world had ever seen.

This autumn marks the 60th anniversary of the Siege of Jadotville, a five-day battle that produced extraordinary acts of courage and heroism. Not surprisingly, the story inspired a movie in 2016, shining a well-deserved spotlight on this previously forgotten and often misunderstood conflict.

TO FULLY appreciate the chaos engulfing central Africa in the early 1960s, one must turn back the clock to explore its dark, blood-stained past. In 1879, King Leopold II of Belgium decided to make the Congo his own private fiefdom, exploiting a bounty of natural resources that included rubber, diamonds, copper, and uranium.

THE SIEGE OF JADOTVILLE

Christopher Warner chats to Jadotville survivor, John Gorman, on the 60th anniversary of the five-day attack in the Congo

John Gorman.
images courtesy of the IUNVA.

The Belgian government later maintained this stranglehold for nearly a century, a period marred by unspeakable atrocities and apartheid. Although the Congolese finally gained their independence in 1960, the transfer of power did not go smoothly. As a result, the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) was established to help restore order.

At the centre of the turmoil, the mineral-rich province of Katanga seceded from the rest of the country.

Moise Tshombe, the self-declared leader of the breakaway state, drew support from the powerful Union Minière du Haut Katanga, a covert Anglo-Belgian mining company responsible for supplying essential components to make nuclear weaponry. This alliance, bolstered by Belgian, French, and Rhodesian military advisers (aka 'mercs') and the Katangan army (Gendarmerie), made any chance of peace a real-

life "Mission Impossible". Threats of Soviet aggression and American spy games provided further high drama.

Tensions only worsened when Belgium's foreign minister requested protection for the Belgian civilian population of Jadotville, a wealthy mining town in southern Katanga.

The ONUC responded by dispatching troops to the area, which eventually ensnared 156 Irishmen of Company A. The unit had been raised from the Irish Army's Western Command based in Athlone and led by Commandant Patrick Quinlan from the sleepy seaside village of Caherdaniel, County Kerry.

Author Declan Power, whose book *Siege of Jadotville* served as the basis of the aforementioned Netflix film, described the 41-year-old officer and keen scholar of combat tactics: "Comdt. Quinlan was an officer of the old school...and a believer in the old military adage 'More sweat on the training ground and less blood on

the battlefield.”

As a measure of precaution, Quinlan ordered his men to dig five-foot deep trenches around the camp perimeter. Construction of the defensive barrier took place at night, allowing them to operate under cover of darkness.

The stern Kerryman also demanded that every soldier carry a gun at all times and stockpile containers of water, underscoring the importance of preparedness and expecting the unexpected.

AT 7:40 on 13 September, 1961, the Katangan Army launched a surprise attack on the Irish position.

The majority of Company A had been attending Mass parade, but a few soldiers on sentry duty were able to alert the others and thwart the charge. A few hours later, however, the enemy returned with substantially increased firepower.

Gorman, now 77, still vividly recalls the harrowing ordeal. In a recent interview with *Ireland's Own*, he recounted a particularly unnerving moment. “Father Fagan, our company chaplain, came over to our trenches and gave us last rites...then all Hell broke loose,” said Gorman.

The relentless back and forth struggle pitted the isolated U.N. detachment against an estimated force of 3,000 spearheaded by Roger Faulques.

Known as the “L’homme aux milles vies” (*The Man of a Thousand Lives*), Faulques was no stranger to combat and owned the battle scars to prove it. The stone-faced, ex-French Foreign Legion officer saw action in the Second World War and later fought in Indochina, the Middle East, and Algeria. As a sought-after soldier of fortune, Faulques expected little resistance from the untested, outgunned foe donning blue berets.

He would be gravely mistaken.

Company A relied on mostly leftover WWII weapons such as bolt-action .303 Enfield rifles and Vickers machine guns. The enemy greeted them with a constant barrage from FAL automatic rifles, 81mm mortars, 75mm artillery field guns, and aerial assaults from a modified Fouga Magister trainer jet, fitted with underwing bombs and machine guns.



John Gorman receiving his Jadotville medal.

Nonetheless, the Irish refused to panic, maintaining (and later improving upon) their well-entrenched position while inflicting severe casualties on the enemy.

Quinlan also managed to negotiate a series of ceasefires to create time for the arrival of reinforcements and much-needed supplies. He received neither. In the end, having run out of water and ammunition, they had no choice but to surrender despite killing 300 of their attackers and wounding 1,000 others.

Astonishingly, the Irish only suffered a handful of injuries without losing a single man.

Not one.

AFTER FIVE weeks of captivity, which brought an uneasy shroud of uncertainty and saw Quinlan dragged into a mock court-martial and sentenced to death, the POWs were released in a highly propagandised spectacle.

Despite its noble intentions, the U.N.'s foray into Africa had turned into an unmitigated disaster.

The quagmire also claimed the life of Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, who died with 15 others (including former Garda Frank Eivers) in a mysterious plane crash on 18th September, 1961.

Now in damage-control mode, the world organisation refused to acknowledge the abject failure of its command structure, and trying to pretend the events surrounding Jadotville never happened.

Upon returning home to Ireland, the survivors were branded as cowards by their own Defense Forces.

The egregious travesty would take decades of relentless pursuit by men like Gorman and the Irish United Nations Veterans Association (IUNVA) before gaining proper recognition. But for many, the long wait had taken its toll, resulting in several company members committing suicide while others fell victim

to alcoholism.

Today, memorials to Company A stand tall at Custume Barracks in Athlone, and for Cmdt. Quinlan near his ancestral home at Coomikista Pass along the Ring of Kerry.

IN 2016, the Irish government issued a Presidential Unit Citation – the first in the State’s history – and later presented the “An Bonn Jadotville” medal to each surviving member and the families of those who have passed. The award depicts an ancient warrior of the Fianna with sword and shield, and the words ‘cosaint chalma’ (valiant defence) and ‘misneach’ (courage).

When asked how he’d like the legacy of Company A to be remembered, Gorman recited the inscription on commemorative scrolls honouring the company: “*That which is painfully gone, let it be so. Like the soil on the soles of your boots, but let it not be without learning that someday your children may walk in your footsteps.*” ■