

FRANK EIVERS – A THREAD OF STEEL



In September 1961, a plane carrying UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold crashed under mysterious circumstances while en route to a peacekeeping mission in the Congo. There were no survivors and among the 16 victims was former Garda Frank Eivers, a recently married UN Field Security Officer, writes Christopher Warner.

The tragedy, which took place on 18 September 1961, around the same time as another disaster struck 5,000 miles away when a rare hurricane slashed its way across Ireland, had sent shockwaves around the world.

Now six decades later, the incident continues to raise more questions than answers. Eivers' role in this chilling cold war drama, taking place during an era when the world teetered on the brink of nuclear ruin, is often overlooked. 'Síocháin' now shines a well-deserved spotlight on his extraordinary life and ultimate sacrifice.

Francis Eivers was born on 15 February 1933 in the village of Ballybay near Kiltoom, Co. Roscommon to Francis Eivers, a painter for Córas Iompair Éireann (CIE), and his wife Elizabeth (née O'Connor).

As the only son growing up in a strict Catholic household with eight sisters, 'Frank' embraced the Cardinal virtues, undoubtedly influenced by being outnumbered eight to one. A bright and curious student, he attended the Ballybay National School and later graduated from Marist College in Athlone.

Eivers had initially considered joining the priesthood, motivated by his inherent desire to help others. His sister Rose, 85, still remembers her brother's unwavering piety. "There was always an incident that stuck in my mind," she

recently told Síocháin. "When we would come out of the bedroom, he'd be on his knees praying. Keeping faith was his main objective in life."

He ultimately chose a different career path, joining the Gardaí on 19 November 1952 [Reg. No. 10236K]. The energetic 20-year-old was initially assigned to Newmarket Station in Dublin but later transferred to nearby Kevin Street. Not surprisingly, Eivers was quickly promoted to Sergeant in 1956. Later that same year, he embarked on the next chapter in his life, which once again heeded to his altruistic nature.

UN PEACEKEEPING DUTIES

Ireland officially became the 63rd member of the United Nations on 14 December 1955. The UN asked the Irish Government to provide security officers for various global missions as part of its commitment. Following a round of interviews, Eivers was one of 25 candidates selected by the peacekeeping organisation. He was given a one-year contract subject to renewal with an offer of becoming pension-eligible after four years.

However, one of the stipulations for the appointment included the option to re-join An Garda Síochána upon completion of UN service. After resigning from the Force with an exemplary discharge, Eivers packed his bags and eagerly

Frank Eivers on his
Wedding Day



headed for the Middle East in August 1957.

Based in Jerusalem, the UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) was the first-ever peacekeeping operation established by the UN. Eivers' posting in the Holy City provided opportunities to explore ancient historical sites and pursue his keen interest in photography. During trips back home to Ballybay, he'd entertain family and friends with movies taken from his exotic travels in destinations that included Egypt and Lebanon.

The UNTSO's geographic position allowed its personnel to assist other UN peacekeeping operations in the region to fulfil their respective mandates. Such was the case in which Eivers later found himself deep in the heart of Africa. The so-called 'Congo Crisis' erupted in the summer of 1960 following the end of Belgium's colonial rule, an era marred by unimaginable brutality, apartheid and relentless pillaging of natural resources. The transfer of power would not go smoothly.

In a rapid succession of events, the newly independent

Republic of the Congo plunged into chaos and disorder. The increasingly dire situation prompted the Congolese Government, under Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, to seek UN assistance. Thus, the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC) was established in the capital of Leopoldville. Although most Western powers formally backed the mission, lucrative mining investments in the area presented a glaring conflict of interest.

A REAL-LIFE 'MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Tensions only grew worse following an insurrection by the breakaway province of Katanga, led by its self-appointed ruler Moïse Tshombé. The mineral-rich territory, home to some of the world's purest deposits of cobalt and uranium (essential components of nuclear weapons), soon fuelled a proxy war between the Soviet Union and the United States.

For Hammarskjöld, an affable Swede renowned for his integrity and relentless work ethic, protecting the burgeoning nation's sovereignty and political independence eventually devolved into a real-life 'Mission Impossible', featuring a hopelessly complex plot, evil villains and the usual suspects from the CIA, KGB, and MI6.

While on furlough from his UN duties, Eivers fell in love with a young woman, Marie Bills, who worked as a secretary at the Irish Press. He had been previously engaged, but the relationship soured when his ex-fiancé objected to living overseas.



Eivers on UN Duty

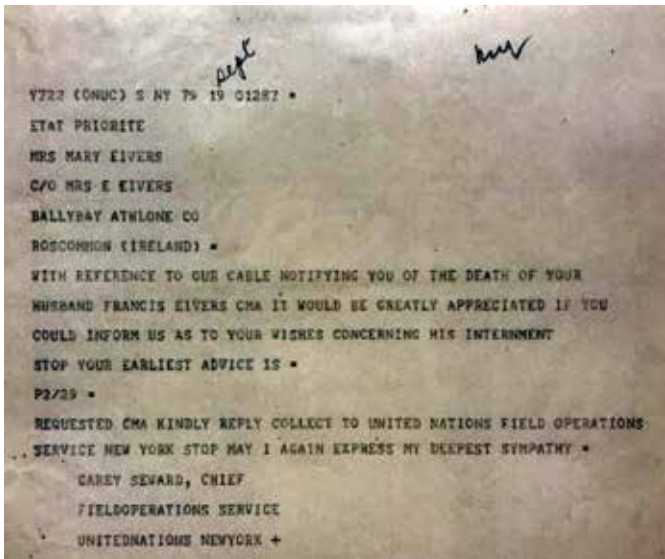
Maria, however, was different. She shared Eivers' robust sense of adventure and admired his steadfast dedication to civil service. The couple officially tied the knot on August 19, 1961 in Dublin.

By now, hostilities in Katanga had reached a boiling point – violence that saw the torture and assassination of Prime Minister Lumumba. As a result, the ONUC expanded its military operations. Ireland eventually deployed troops during the conflict, who engaged in numerous clashes against secessionist forces bolstered by a phalanx of battle-hardened mercenaries.

The fighting included a siege at the mining town of Jadotville, where a heavily outgunned and outnumbered Irish company inflicted severe casualties on the enemy before being forced to surrender on 17 September 1961. The date is significant – falling on the same day Eivers boarded a flight with Hammarskjöld to the town of Ndola in the British Protectorate of Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zambia).

Frank Eivers and Harold Julien, head of ONUC security and
Korean War veteran.





Telegram Received by the Eivers Family.

UN SECRETARY GENERAL'S BODYGUARD

In a twist of fate, the Roscommon man had recently taken over bodyguard duties from a fellow Garda, Sean Quinn, whose wife was expecting their second child. The Secretary-General was scheduled to meet with Tshombé in hopes of mediating a ceasefire; at the very least, both sides agreed to convene at a neutral location. Leading up to the negotiations, Eivers developed a natural rapport with Hammarskjöld, finding common ground on their deep faith and boundless energy.

An experienced Swedish aircrew mapped a circuitous flight plan to minimise exposure over hostile Kantagese airspace. However, shortly after midnight local time, the UN chartered DC-6B named 'Albertina' (registered in Sweden as SE-BDY) disappeared into a forest of evergreen trees and dense bush nine miles from the Ndola Airport.

Inexplicably, for reasons that have never been adequately explained, local authorities did not launch a formal search party until mid-morning. Royal Ndola Police

finally arrived at the crash site 15 hours after the plane's scheduled arrival time. The discovery was horrific.

SITE OF THE DESTRUCTION

A heap of charred metal and assorted debris littered the destruction zone. Death permeated the smoky air thick, exacerbated by the sweltering heat and swarms of mopane flies. The aircraft had initially clipped the treetops before smashing into an enormous anthill. More than 4,000 litres of fuel gushed from the ruptured tanks, turning the wreckage into a raging inferno.

All but two of the deceased were burned beyond recognition. Hammarskjöld was found on his back with a broken spine and surrounded by playing cards a few meters away from the smouldering fuselage. The ace of spades (aka 'Death Card') had been placed on his body.

On the edge of the destruction zone, the police stumbled upon a sole survivor. Harold Julien, the head of ONUC security and a veteran of the Korean War, had managed to escape the burning aircraft through an emergency exit.

Suffering from multiple fractures and severe burns, the American was rushed to a local hospital, where he drifted in and out of sedation. Julien later described seeing "sparks in the sky" and how explosions rocked the plane as it flew over the runway. He succumbed to his injuries five days later – but would have almost certainly lived had he been rescued sooner or transported back to a better-equipped medical facility.

NEWS REACHES IRELAND

Back in Dublin, Marie Eivers was watching TV at her parents' house when she first learned of the crash. The newly-minted Mrs Eivers eagerly began making preparations to join her husband in Leopoldville – plans that were soon forever shattered.

RTE broadcast the announcement on its 10:15 radio bulletin. Shortly afterwards, a reporter from The Irish Press called at the house. Marie's father quickly summoned the local priest, who delivered the message to his now widowed 21-year-old daughter. Meanwhile, in County Roscommon, the Eivers' family received the same devastating news.



Funeral procession for Frank Eivers.



A gentle rain fell on the Irish capital as Eivers' remains arrived at Dublin Airport on 30 September 1961. Both the tricolour and the blue and white flag of the UN blanketed his coffin while Gardai rendered full ceremonial honours under Chief Supt William Halloran.

The next day, mourners lined the streets for the well-attended state funeral. Father Michael Browne, CC, officiated the Requiem Mass at the Church of Holy Rosary, Harold's Cross, before reciting graveside prayers at Mount Jerome Cemetery.

The Rhodesian Board of Investigation launched the first inquiry into the air disaster. The colonial officials,

whose disdain for the UN was barely disguised, ultimately determined that the pilots had misjudged the night landing on an unfamiliar approach and flew the plane into the ground. Although a subsequent UN investigation reached a different conclusion, its report failed to determine what caused the 'accident.'

CONSPIRACY THEORIES CIRCULATE

A slew of conspiracy theories immediately began to circulate, suggesting Hammarskjöld had been the victim of foul play. Adding to the intrigue, several residents on the outskirts of Ndola recalled seeing 'SE-BDY' being shot down by a second, smaller aircraft.

However, investigators either ignored or downplayed these eyewitness accounts because they were native Africans – and statements by Julien were later dismissed due to his impaired condition.

At the time, Aviation Katangaise (Avikat) possessed the type of jet fighters capable of ambushing the Albatross, such as the Fouga Magister. Noted historians Maurin Picard and Torben Gülstorff, both of whom have written extensively about the Congo Crisis (and contributed to this story)



speculate that a German-manufactured Dornier Do 28 could have also pulled off such an attack. Regardless, one thing remains certain: Avikat boasted a deep roster of hired assassins with no shortage of air combat experience.

Recently published books, studies and investigations have provided further evidence and plausibility that the incident was not a result of pilot error. For example, a 2017 UN report led by Mohamed Chande Othman, the former Chief Justice of Tanzania, concluded: "There is a significant amount of



Frank Eivers grave at Mount Jerome.

About the Author:

Christopher Warner is an Irish American actor and freelance writer. He's a frequent contributor to *Síocháin* and has written for several magazines and websites across multiple genres, including *Military History Matters*, *WWII Quarterly*, *Aviation History*, *Ireland's Own*, and *Irish America*. He currently resides in Co. Kerry with his wife Maureen and their brood of cats.



evidence from eyewitnesses that they observed more than one aircraft in the air, that the other aircraft may have been a jet, that SE-BDY was on fire before it crashed, and/or that SE-BDY was fired upon or otherwise actively engaged by another aircraft. In its totality, this evidence is not easily dismissed."

POIGNANT TRIBUTES

Over the years, the memory of Frank Eivers has been kept alive with poignant tributes, honouring a man who gave his life for the cause of peace. A special edition of the 'Secretariat News' featured a segment that described the soft-spoken Irishman this way: "He is remembered, too, for a most loyal devotion to his job; for many small, unselfish acts of kindness to his colleagues, and for the quiet God Bless with which he closed every conversation."

The UN posthumously awarded him the Dag Hammarskjold Medal in 2002, presented at the Garda Training College in Templemore. Frank is fondly remembered by the Garda colleagues he served with in Newmarket and Kevin Street in those early days.

In 2017, an Eivers family reunion took place, organised by Frank's niece, Maria Cooney-Hantzara. More than 150 relatives from all over the world attended the event, which included a prayer ceremony at a memorial plaque in Ballybay.

Cooney-Hantzara continues to be a vocal advocate for greater transparency and accountability regarding the crash – not to mention her desire to bring closure for the family. "The whole thing has been very difficult for all his sisters seeking the truth," said Cooney-Hantzara. "I felt that I really owed it to them to help them find it."

