

## News feature

# Ulster soldiers ready

The men of the Royal Dragoon Guards, which can claim an Irish heritage through the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, will soon be patrolling the streets of Iraq. News Letter reporter **KATE CHAMBRÉ** has been to see them in Germany as they completed final training

NEXT month the soldiers of the Royal Dragoon Guards, which includes a number of Ulstermen in its ranks, will return to Iraq.

Leading them on their peace mission will be Lieutenant Colonel Tim Hyams, who served in south Armagh and Antrim during the height of the Troubles.

The RDG was formed over 10 years ago as a result of the amalgamation of the 4th/7th RDGs and the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards.

Nowadays the RDG carries with it the traditions and history of four of the finest regiments in the British Cavalry and serves as part of the 4th Mechanised Brigade.

Known as the 'Black Rats', the regiment will provide the heavy tank element in Iraq alongside the 1st Battalion Scots Guards and the 1st Battalion the Mercian Regiment (Cheshires).

Lt Col Hyams, 41, said the RDG was extremely proud of its heritage and is keen to have a healthy mix in the ranks of soldiers from both Northern Ireland and Yorkshire who he said, "have an enormous amount in common".

These common traits include stoicism, being fiercely independent and loyal, having the ability to fight against outsiders and good humour, he reckons.

"They will look after each other through thick and thin and are great at bringing people back down to earth," he said.

Currently based with his Republic of Ireland-born wife Kitty in Munster, Germany, while their two Lisburn-born sons are at boarding school in England, Lt Col Hyams said that when the RDG go to Iraq soldiers and officers will hugely rely on each other.

Differences between rank and background



**FIRE:** The Royal Dragoon Guards being trained to react to attacks from insurgents in Iraq. Right, Lieutenant Colonel Tim Hyams



are irrelevant when in combat, he said, and what is vitally important is that everyone works together as a team.

During Telic XI, the operational code name for their six-month tour next month, the RDG will be based at the Contingency Operating Base (COB) at Basra International Airport, he said.

Making a difference in Iraq is vitally important to Lt Col Hyams: "The country sends us to do a job. What matters to us is that we do the right thing and we are making a difference.

"Our job is to think how can we make life better for Iraqi people and what matters to me is that we do our best to make it a better place.

"Once the decision to go to war is made, my job is to get under it and to take my soldiers in there, to make sure everything we do there is appropriate and to get through it in one piece and not second guess the government."

He said when his regiment went to Iraq during the earlier operation Telic V they were extremely lucky not to have lost any men.

"We were there at a particular time and a particular place. Please God it's the same this time," he said.

Lt Col Hyams, whose great great uncle was a cardinal in Dublin, said that part of his mental preparation for going to Iraq is to be aware that some of his men may be injured, or even killed.

But he insisted that it is something that he tries not to dwell on too much as it would colour his perspective on things and mean he wasn't focusing on the job at hand.

"I reflect on it. Dwelling on it would be the wrong thing to do," he said. "You are aware it's a very serious situation. It's incumbent I reflect on everything I do."

From the moment he joined the Army 21-

years ago he said his ambition was to command a regiment.

"I'm in a very privileged position of commanding this regiment and the brilliant people in its ranks."

He said he would be concentrating on doing the very best job for his men and not letting them down.

The training his soldiers are undergoing for Iraq, he said, has been designed by the people who have just returned from that country.

"People are back telling us what is happening. The men are being trained by people who have real experience," he said.

The pattern of high intensity training at Sennelager Training Camp had been drawn from experiences in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Kosovo where important lessons had been learnt, said the lieutenant colonel.

## Growing confidence for Carrick trooper as D-day looms



**TRAINING:** Trooper Jonathan Ritchie, 23.

HE was working as a junior hairdresser in Newtownards when he decided to join the Army and exchange his scissors for a sub-machine gun.

Now two years on Trooper Jonathan Ritchie, 23, from Carrickfergus is preparing for combat in Iraq with B Squadron of the Royal Dragoon Guards [RDG] tank regiment.

And if he is nervous about his deployment to the war-torn country next month he isn't showing it.

During a training exercise at Sennelager Training Camp near Paderborn in Germany he insisted: "We're trained too well - there's nothing to worry about."

Then he added: "To be honest if we need to be somewhere to help another country so be it. I'll go anywhere I'm told to go."

The young man had passed his NVQ Level 2 in hairdressing when he decided to join the RDG.

"A few of my friends got involved through the Territorial Army and it sounded amazing what they were doing. I was tempted to join because of the travel and pay," he said.

Jonathan, who has two younger brothers, signed up for the RDG in Holywood, outside Belfast in February 2006 and after successfully passing his interview began his basic training at an Army camp in Winchester.

After that he went on to do specialised training at Bovington in Dorset, where he learnt maintenance skills and how to drive a tank.

Action films, he admitted were the motivating factor behind him wanting to learn to drive tanks.

"I'd watched lots of films and they looked awesome," he said.

After learning the skills required to drive a tank in combat, Jonathan arrived in Paderborn in October 2006.

But almost immediately he was sent on exercise to Poland to put what he'd learnt into action. Since then he has also been sent to Canada on training exercises.

Jonathan is aware his deployment to Iraq will inevitably cause anguish to his parents but knows they will support him in whatever he chooses to do.

"Obviously any parent is going to be slightly worried. But they will always be proud of you no matter what."

The day he officially became a soldier Jonathan counts as among the best days of his life.

"It was an amazing day and I

don't regret for one minute joining the Army. The Royal Dragoon Guards is like a family. My fellow soldiers are like brothers," he said.

"Since I've been in the Army my confidence has improved and grown."

Indeed, having left school at 16 Jonathan is now planning to complete an 'A' level GCE in English and an Open University degree in business management.

And he wholeheartedly believes other young men and women in Northern Ireland would benefit from a spell in the Army.

"I'd definitely recommend others to join. Especially people who aren't doing too much. It can really help you and increase your confidence."

# to face enemy again

## Preparing for unknown dangers

SOME are aged no more than 18 yet in just over one month's time will be travelling to Iraq with the Army.

Whether these young men understand, agree or disagree with the war it is irrelevant.

It is all part of the job they signed up to do.

During a trip to the Army's Sennelager training camp in Germany a number of young soldiers from the Province who belong to the Royal Dragoon Guards (RDG) spoke to the News Letter about going to Iraq for six months.

Each belong to different tank squadrons and are trained in using Challenger Two, Warrior and Bulldog tanks.

Troop leader of B squadron, Lieutenant Karl Craig, whose uncle is a minister in Londonderry and whose parents are originally from Northern Ireland, said soldiers and officers have undergone intensive training for Iraq.

He said: "We've been kept up-to-date by the boys currently in Iraq about what is going on there."

Asked if he is nervous about going to Iraq, he said: "Obviously you can't say how you're going to react until you are there."

Corporal Matthew Cosby, 25, originally from Millisle, who is married and has an son of 18 months, is also going to Iraq with the RDG.

He is also attached to B squadron of the RDG and has an older 28-year-old brother in D squadron.

It is Matthew's second posting to the war-torn country. He said he has reservations about going to Iraq because of his young son.

"I'm not really nervous," he said. "I wasn't the last time but obviously now I have more concerns because now I've got a son."

However, each soldier will be given leave for 10 days while serving in Iraq which he said gave them all something



**ALERT:** soldiers from the Royal Dragoon Guards are shown a locating the enemy demonstration

to look forward to.

Describing the British Army as the "best in the world" a 28-year-old sergeant from the Shankill who asked not to be identified said he'd rather not go to Iraq because of his three kids.

"We are there to try and restore normality to a country that is in civil war. I was there from the end of 2004 to May 2005 and it was very quiet then," he said.

"But, I'd rather not go out because I have a wife and three boys. I'm not so much scared of anything, it's just I'm away from my family."

He said he tried not to reflect too much on the possibility that he and his fellow soldiers might not come back from Iraq alive.

"I go out to do a job and don't think I'm not coming back. We are trained well and are aware that some people might not come back.

But we go out as one and come back as one."

The west Belfast man even went as far as saying he would have preferred to be stationed in Northern Ireland during the height of the Troubles than in Iraq.

He said: "These insurgents are fighting for a cause and will even blow themselves up for it."

"There was never an IRA or UVF member willing to intentionally blow themselves up so it's a lot more dangerous and unstable in Iraq."

After a 'locating the enemy' demonstration at Sennelager camp Trooper Andrew Mackenzie, who is 19 and comes from Dundonald, and is attached to A squadron admitted that he is "a bit nervous" about going to Iraq but said he doesn't regret joining the Army.

"It's something I've always wanted to do since I was a kid," he said.



**FRONTLINE:** Reporter Kate Chambré talks to Trooper Andrew Mackenzie, 19, from Dundonald while Corporal Cosby, from Millisle, takes aim, below

## Ulster visit to honour lost comrade



**TRIBUTE:** Corporal Chris Stead, 25,

THREE former comrades of Ulsterman Ian Chalmers, the young man who was killed in August while working as a security guard in Iraq, are travelling to Northern Ireland this month to visit his grave.

Newly promoted Corporal Chris Stead, 25, a soldier with B squadron of the Royal Dragoon Guards said he wants to visit the Province to pay tribute to his friend before his deployment to Iraq next month.

Corporal Stead said he and other friends of Mr Chalmers were "devastated" when they were told that he had been killed in Iraq at the port of Al Kut

on the Tigris river.

"We called him 'wee man' because he was only tiny. He was really bubbly and outgoing and always lifted morale. I was told about his death through other people while training, and it really cut me up," Corporal Stead said.

"He used to be one of my best mates when he was in the army too but we lost contact for a few years when he left."

Corporal Stead, whose parents live in Donegal, said he wasn't aware that Mr Chalmers had recently married until he was told about his death.

"I'm going over to Northern Ireland with three friends and we're

hoping to meet his wife Vicky and the rest of his family."

The young man said he and other friends of Ian's had organised a collection within their regiment to raise some money to buy a wreath to put on his grave when they visit Northern Ireland during their leave.

Recalling happy memories spent with Ian, Corporal Stead said: "When I first met him I used to weigh in at 17-stone. He took me to the gym and I lost four stone in the first year. Every time I'm in the gym now I think of him."

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