

FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!

INITIAL AVIATION FIRE FIGHTERS

BY SGT WAYNE FITZGERALD PHOTOS BY ARMN JAMIE BARRETT

On 4th July, An Cosantóir staff visited the Air Corps Fire Training Facility in Baldonnel to see the five students of the Initial Aviation Fire Fighters (IAFF) course being put through their paces on a hot summer's day in Casement Aerodrome.

The students learn a variety of skills on the six-week course, including basic fire-fighting skills such as hose running, branch, pump and monitor operation, breathing apparatus and search-and-rescue techniques, with a large focus on teamwork throughout. At the time of our visit the course was in its fifth week, culminating in a final exercise. Week 6 sees the probationary fire fighters go 'on station' with the Crash Rescue Service (CRS) to learn procedures before going on shift.

Capt Jane O'Neill (506 Sqn), Fire Officer and OIC of the course, briefed us on the exercise scenario: "A troop-carrying rotation flight on final approach to Baldonnel develops an engine fire, which spreads to the undercarriage and the oleo strut (a pneumatic/hydraulic shock absorber located on the landing gear). The fire then develops into an internal fire requiring casualty rescue."

Flt Sgt Willie Norton (506 Sqn), who has 40 years' experience in aviation fire fighting explained the simulator where the exercise was to take place: "The Air Corps Fire Training Facility is state of the art and regarded as one of the best in the country. It can simulate the undercarriage and engine fire of a Boeing 737 passenger plane, a Gulfstream IV jet or a CASA Maritime Patrol aircraft, including the correct height of each aircraft. It is constructed in 6mm plate steel, and when lit can reach 1,000°C; it's now nearly 400° inside."

The Fire Training Facility, with its state-of-the-art fire equipment, is located in a remote area of the aerodrome, and is used to train personnel on all aspects of aviation fire fighting, such as crash-rescue drills and life-saving techniques.

The Initial Aviation Fire Fighters course is conducted under the auspices and certification of the International Fire Training Centre (IFTC), based in the UK. The IFTC instructor/assessor for this exercise was Ricky Wilson, who is a regular visitor to Baldonnel.

As the exercise started and flames billowed from the simulator, the crew of Rescue 9 got their call. (The Air Corps currently operates two Austrian-made Rosenbauer Panther 6x6 rapid-intervention fire tenders (RIFTS), designated Rescue 8 and Rescue 9). The crew commander, Cpl Nigel O'Shaughnessy, and his team of five students were at the crash site in less than a minute. (The Air Corps Fire Service is required to meet a three-minute response time to any location in Baldonnel.)

The crew quickly got the 737's engine fire under control and then hosed down the exterior of the aircraft to enable a rescue. A short ladder was placed against the fuselage and BA (breathing apparatus) Team 1 entered the aircraft with smoke immediately billowing out of the door. Shortly after, the rear door of the aircraft was opened and the fire fighters sprayed water out of the exit with their hose. (Later Cpl O'Shaughnessy explained: "Discharging a hose from inside an aircraft through an open door or window draws the smoke out." The simulator safety officer, Sgt John Dommican, added: "It won't take all the smoke out, but it will give the operators a better view inside the aircraft.")

Over the radio we heard BA Team 1 saying they had found a casualty, and within seconds two crew members brought the casualty

to safety before heading straight back into the aircraft. Within minutes we heard 'Casualty' again over the airwaves, and the fire fighters soon appeared with another casualty.

Everything that was required was carried out very quickly, which is exactly what is required in such an emergency, and in no time the exercise was over. Although it had been quick and efficient it must have been far from easy operating in such conditions, with intense heat and thick smoke and loaded down with equipment, all while wearing breathing apparatus. After the students had made the scene safe, put away all the equipment, and rolled up the aprt hoses, they lined up proudly in front of Rescue 9 with their instructors.

The IFTC's Ricky Wilson, who has spent 35 weeks in Baldonnel over the last 17 years instructing and assessing Air Corps fire fighters, gave us his opinion on the exercise: "Their level of training is excellent but the real work starts next week when they go on station and start working on a crew. We are only giving them the building blocks so they can continue to develop on specialist courses and maybe progress on to a Crew Commanders course."

Lt Col Barry Sillis (OC No 5 Sp Wing and Base Commander) and Comdt Dominic Noone (OC 506 Sqn) attended the final exercise and afterwards Lt Col Sillis spoke to the students. "Having watched the exercise we could see your confidence and how you worked as a team," he said. "You can see your camaraderie after the last number of weeks training together. I would like to thank you for the effort so far, stick with it and keep up your fitness and your mental fitness, as you can see you'll need it 'on crew'."

Lt Col Sillis also thanked Ricky Wilson for his continued instruction during the training and accreditation assessments.

Successful students at the end of the course will receive an aviation fire fighters certificate that is recognised worldwide throughout the aviation industry.

Another Initial Aviation Fire Fighters course will be conducted early in 2019, so anyone interested should keep an eye out for a notification in routine orders and on unit noticeboards. ■

Vox Pops

PTE IGGY MITCHEL, MCKEE BKIS COY

"The weather is really hot, 30°, so working in this heat is really tough. I was looking for a new challenge after spending 12 years in the Printing Press. In 2002 I was in the Engar Corps and was called up on the fire-fighters strike. I was on call in the fire station in the DFTC."



PTE KEVIN FOLEY, ORD COY, DFTC

"I started my career in Baldonnel as I did the recruit training part of my armourer artificer apprenticeship here. Fire fighting is another hands-on trade, but it's more physical, although working on weapons gave me a prior knowledge of mechanics, welding and hydraulics. The heat is hard going, but I'm enjoying it. I'm looking forward to the challenge and a shorter commute as I live locally."



PTE GERRY HOEY, 27 INF BN

"I've always had an interest in doing this course and I'm glad to be finally on it. This is a very physically demanding course, but it's definitely the best course I've done since joining the Defence Forces. I'm looking forward to starting the shift work and being on call."



PTE SEAN MUIHOLLAND, 27 INF BN

"This is a massive difference to the infantry training I'm used to. I've a big interest in aviation and I've been training for a private pilot's licence for the last few years. A lot of the terminology is the same and I feel both qualifications complement each other. Like the others have said, it's a physically tough course, and I'm happy to be getting through it."



Pictured in front of Rescue 9 are the students and instructors along with OC No 5 Sp Wing, Lt Col Barry Sillis, OC 506 Sqn, Comdt Dominic Noone, Capt Jane O'Neill, Flt Sgt Willie Norton, Sgt John Dommican and IFTC's Ricky Wilson.