

Geraldine Attledress

IMAGINE spending Saturday night waiting for an armed enemy in a damp pine forest. You've just walked over eight kilometres, covering mountainous land in rain and hail, jumped ditches, walked thigh-deep through rivers and wrung out your second pair of socks.

And on Monday you have to be back in your "normal" job as a managing director or builder.

This is what An Forsa Cosaint Aitiuil (FCA) is all about. When I joined them on a major military exercise last weekend, I wasn't prepared for such an adventure. There was no Ramboesque jingoism; this was serious stuff, and it was easy to pretend the gunfire was real.

Indeed, home seemed very far from the range at Kilpedder where a bloody war was in full swing Ireland (West Wicklow) and the fictitious nation of Arklandia (East Wicklow).

We had infiltrated the border (the Wicklow Way) and set up camp in the woods, which we had to defend against the fierce Arklandian army. They had come from an FCA shooting exercise in the Curragh and would be fed by our cooks in the morning (as prisoners, of course), but they spent the night out in the cold.

"I don't believe in molycodding the men", says Commandant Paul Brownen of the 21st Infantry Battalion, who was the coordinator for the exercise.

My tent and safari bed were luxury compared to the sleeping conditions of the men, who made canopies from their rainproof ponchos, but I was one of the many who wouldn't sleep.

The "war" started on Saturday morning, around 11.30, when the 21st Infantry Battalion prepared to leave Rockbrae House in Bray, home of "A" Company. "A" Coy was joined by "B" (from the Dun Laoghaire area) and "C" (from South Wicklow).

First, maps were consulted and the men were divided into three platoons, each with a Lieutenant in charge. "Orders" were given and the route plotted. We were to be in Kilpedder by 8 p.m. Fortunately for my far-from-military physical condition, I would join Platoon Number Three after they had walked at least four kilometres over the Djouce mountain.

My role was that of a "friendly" agent who would warn them to keep south of Carrigower, where the "enemy" was seen. Before leaving, we had salad sandwiches and good, strong tea ("army tea", I was told) to keep us going until dinner at 9 p.m. The men left in trucks which would drop them off in the wilderness.

WICKLOW FCA ranks were broken last weekend when the "men-only" Army reserves were joined on endurance-testing exercises by our girl, Geraldine Comiskey.

After a day of scrambling through undergrowth, humping a lady-size kit instead of a shoulder bag, Geraldine reports that she can now understand why girls are not taken into the FCA, even though officer ranks in the regular Army are open to women. It's no way to treat a lady.

It was a double first for women, as photographer for the day was Marie O'Connor.

Meanwhile, I was given the new light-weight combat jacket, peaked cap and a flask of water which was so heavy that I thought I'd need it after carrying it a few yards. But it served a double purpose: it was attached to a belt and whenever I got tired, I rested my elbow on the flask. This was most un-military. But so was my way of marching and it was all I could do to keep up.

Platoon No. 3 emerged dripping wet from the forest at Ballinastoe crossroads, where I waited in a car with the Director of Operations, Comdmt. Bob Murphy, and two training officers from the "regular" army, captains John Barry and Mick McCarthy. I passed my message to Lieutenant Sam Irwin who led the platoon and braced myself for another hail shower, but the sun came out instead and I had to imagine we were in Lebanon.

The first obstacle I met was a barbed-wire fence with a water logged ditch behind. The men jumped it effortlessly, and I just managed with a bit of help. Then we trudged across gorse and rocks before coming to a stream which was too wide to jump. "We can't get any wetter!" someone shouted encouragingly and I thanked God for waterproof trousers and riding boots.

We continued in similar fashion until we came to the road again; by now I was sure I had found new muscles in my legs and wondered if my mother would recognise me. The real enemy seemed to be the road, which was trying to be a wall instead.

The army range at Kilpedder was a welcome sight and a cup of tea never tasted so good. This was where it became really enjoyable, as even the cold added to the sense of escapism from the tame, civilised world which was only a few miles

downhill. Before dinner, the troops set up camps in the woods and I put on an extra jumper.

But we could not relax in the normal sense, because enemies are notorious for pouncing when you're sitting down to a meal. I couldn't help feeling a pang of pity for the enemy who had to carry packed lunches while our cooks prepared a hearty stew. As the only vegetation on the site, I was given a delicious salad.

The sheep made it particularly difficult to sneak up on suspected enemies, as they loudly protested against 130 men interrupting their sleep. All the natural conditions of a real war were there and Comdmt. Brownen said he would talk to the men about what they had learned afterwards.

If the country entered a real war, the FCA would provide back-up for the full-time army so it was important that they were highly trained. The guns carried blanks though the regular soldiers provided security with loaded weapons. I was told, however, that even a "blank" can cause injury.

The range would create enough difficulties in daylight, but at night the pitfalls were magnified. I lost count of the times I fell as I climbed steep hills. And I began to understand the real thrill of the FCA as I found myself doing things I would never do otherwise: mucky ditches and treacherous barbed wire were all part of the excitement and the aches disappeared quickly because I was concentrating on trying to run as fast as the others without being seen by the lurking enemy.

By the end of the exercise, the men had walked and ran at least 20 kilometres and I wasn't sure if I was a soldier, friendly agent, traitor or casualty. The most important part of it all for me was that I had enjoyed it, but the men had to see it as a vital lesson as well. Apart from the patrols, they had to lay telephone lines (which doubled up as trip-wires) and take turps as sentries.

Breakfast was at six - being awake at that hour is not the same as waking and it all felt like one long day. I ate a bowl of porridge before we left to chase the enemy through the woods down the road.

The enemy was eventually ambushed before being invited up for lunch, and they're even joining in the victory parade in the Dun Laoghaire festival on Sunday.



In the firing line: Geraldine (centre) with Leeson Woods of Arklow and Patrick Donovan, Wicklow, during the "Exercise" at Kilpedder.



In action with the members of her team after a four-mile trek through the woods to the base at Kilpedder.



Members of 'B' Coy. taking part in the "Exercise."



Back in civvies, Geraldine gets a right royal send-off from her friends in the 21st Infantry Battalion, F.C.A., after a very interesting exercise. Pictured with Geraldine are Comdmt. Paul Brownen and Comdmt. Bob Murphy who looked after Geraldine very well during her spell with the F.C.A.



Checking out weapons for the "Exercise" by the F.C.A. at Kilpedder.