

Premium Home / New Zealand

MIQ and Operation Protect: The two-year tour of duty no soldier expected



Kim Knight

Senior journalist - Premium lifestyle - NZ Herald - 26 Mar, 2022 05:00 AM 21 mins to read



It was the single largest Defence Force deployment in half a century. More than 6200 Army, Navy and Air Force personnel were involved in Operation Protect and the staffing of 32 managed isolation and quarantine hotels. What was life like on this new front line? And what was the collateral cost? As MIQ winds down, Kim Knight speaks to some of the people who guarded the country against Covid

Lieutenant Colonel Sheree Alexander is choosing her words carefully.

"There was one particularly lovely chap who thought it was appropriate to ... how to put this diplomatically?"

She pauses.

"He was using our ladies as a masturbatory aid. He was telling them that he was going off to do that, based on having seen them. Yeah. Not the highest class of individuals that you'd want to voluntarily work with."

Exactly two years ago today, New Zealanders woke up in lockdown. Covid-19 was in the community and, at 11.59pm the night before, the entire country entered alert level 4. Schools and non-essential businesses were shut; household bubbles were formed. That morning, charter buses were spotted offloading new overseas returnees at a hotel in Ellerslie, Auckland.

According to the official Government timeline: "From 26 March, travellers stay at the Novotel Ellerslie for self-isolation". But it's indicative of how fluid the situation was that, this week, three separate government departments were unable to tell the Weekend Herald the exact nature of that earliest Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) facility.

What we do know, two years on, is that MIQ stopped the spread of Covid. It absolutely saved lives. But it also had a cost - literally, personally and painfully.

Ultimately, 32 hotels in five centres would accommodate almost 230,000 overseas returnees and 4400 community cases of Covid. Multiple organisations combined to deliver the MIQ response. Hospitality staff, health workers, police, government bureaucrats, private contractors and, from August 2020 onwards, half of the New Zealand Defence Force.

This was a front line no soldier had ever imagined. Mechanics became security guards. Pilots became desk jockeys. Trade training was disrupted, participation in overseas exercises was curtailed and camp life suffered as barracks emptied out. At home, parents became sole caregivers and children struggled to understand the repeated disruptions of a six-week-on, six-week-off work cycle.

In the 12 months to the end of January, 1556 personnel resigned from the Defence Force. With international borders shut, the tight local labour market offered skilled tradespeople better pay – but MIQ work was also a factor. One wellbeing survey, conducted last May, showed almost one-third of deployed staff had concerns about their isolation and quarantine rotations. And around one-third of those who quit had served on the Covid response operation.

Private Luke Drennan: "I know a few people who left and cited MIQ as a reason. It went from the Army being the Army, to this being the number one output. Large blocks of training were really hard to plan for and lots of peoples' courses got put off. That would have put people behind in their careers and then they get disillusioned and it pushes them over the edge to leave. It might not be the entire reason, but it definitely contributed. MIQ is just the straw that broke the camel's back."

Major Steve Macbeth: "Think of a young infantry soldier ... you march fast, you can do a lot of chin-ups, you can shoot your rifle straight, you can go to the Solomon Islands and help a Government maintain control when asked to under legal parameters of an international mission. That's what you do. And when you're not doing that, you're thinking about doing that and you're training to do that and you're solely focused on that. And then, all of a sudden, you're not going to carry your weapon in a foreign land – you are going to work in a hotel."

The Kiwi soldier, says Macbeth, can do whatever job is thrown their way. "But it takes a certain amount of agility and mental flexibility to get into customer service."

They called it "Operation Protect" – the Defence Force's single largest commitment of personnel since the Korean War, more than 50 years ago. Defence has been involved with the country's Covid response from the very beginning. In January 2020, before New Zealand saw its first community case, it oversaw the campervan quarantining of 157 returnees from Wuhan, China. In April, it went into MIQ facilities and then, in August, participation ramped up significantly when Defence took over security duties.

The military is a community in miniature. Virtually every job you can think of is represented. The "day jobs" of Operation Protect's regular and reserve force personnel ran the gamut: Weapon technicians, warfare officers, chefs, lawyers, school teachers, accountants, photographers, aeronautical metal workers and personal training instructors.

Kiwis coming home did up to 14 days in MIQ [sometimes called MIF by the military] hotels. Ultimately, some of the Army, Navy and Air Force personnel who patrolled exercise areas and helped oversee facilities would clock up more than 300 days on the ground for Operation Protect. What did that look like back home?

"In one month alone this year, I personally know of six families that split due to stress of the military here in Linton. Mostly because of financial or MIF-related stress, causing relationships to break down. They all have children. Six families broken apart in one month."

That's a public comment posted last year on Facebook, after a plea from Wiremu Moffitt, an Army sergeant major, for soldiers to "hold the line" – to carefully consider any decisions around premature release from service.

What happens in the Defence Force generally stays in the Defence Force. Recruits sign up to serve their country – not criticise it. The 250-plus responses to Moffitt's post highlighted the depth of feeling about Operation Protect.

From the outside looking in, it made perfect sense to send the military into MIQ. Returnees were escaping and private security guards were reportedly asleep on the job. Covid was the enemy and why not use a Government-funded Defence Force to keep the country safe? Here's another comment prompted by Moffitt's post: "FYI it ain't just grunts doing MIQ dude ... everyone in the Army is getting grabbed for it ..."

In January this year, the Defence Force (including reserves) comprised 15,480 people – 6766 Army, 2853 Navy and 2846 Air Force personnel, plus 3015 civilian staff. Operation Protect would, ultimately, involve 50.6 per cent of the average total military headcount.

The Annual Review of the New Zealand Defence Force, released last month, lists work that was not done in 2020/21, largely because of the impact of Covid and the lack of resource – more than 50 projects in total.

Lieutenant Colonel Sheree Alexander has almost 23 years of military service. Usually based at Linton Army Camp, she commands more than 500 civilian, reserve and regular force personnel. During Operation Protect, she set up (and for two rotations, lived in) a "forward operating base" in the Waldorf Apartments on Auckland's Symonds St.

The base housed 250 soldiers at any one time; a little further down the road, Air Force and Navy personnel lived in a university hostel.

"You wouldn't have seen us, because we took our uniforms with us and got changed at the hotels. We didn't take public transport. There was one civilian in the building with us. I don't know what he thought. I guess, to him, we were the risk element."

To be very clear, Alexander is not complaining about her posting. All of the serving personnel who took part in these Weekend Herald interviews had Defence Force clearance to, simply, put a human face on this unprecedented pandemic response. What was its impact on their lives? Their careers? Their families?

Alexander says morale in the apartment block shifted according to Covid response settings. At alert levels 3 and 4, for example, soldiers (drawn from parts of the country that were living in level 2 conditions) couldn't go to gyms or visit friends or family in Auckland. They went from their hotel shifts to the relative isolation of their rooms, over and over. Curfew was 10pm; any potential in-house Covid cases meant a lockdown within a lockdown.

"I won't lie, level 4 conditions were pretty hellish – I had pretty much the same troops deploy in August/September as I did at New Year's and it was a marked difference – it was quite a challenge for them, particularly being so isolated away from their normal support network. We used social media, we had physical training challenges, e-sport competitions and quizzes, but nothing beats being able to see your soldiers face to face.

"We had quite a lot of young individuals, either straight off or not long off recruit courses going up there with not a lot of life experience behind them. A lot of them got some really good stuff out of it, but there were also quite a lot of confronting situations on top of them being new into their NZDF careers."

In August 2021, the Government made the decision to extend quarantine facilities and take in community cases infected with the new Delta variant. For those guarding the hotels, it was a turning point.

"Before that, it was hit and miss as to what the returnee attitudes were to the process. You're always going to have personality challenges. But there was a significant uptick in challenges once we had those community cases," says Alexander.

"My soldiers faced a fair amount of abuse. Verbal, threats of some fairly serious harm to our people. People were spat at and filmed while verbal abuse was going on. There were some very sexually oriented comments, derogatory comments towards people. Hats off to the police for having to deal with those sorts of people on a daily basis in their work. For our staff, it was quite confronting."

But you are not, says Alexander firmly, "going to get any political commentary from our staff" about any of this, because "deployments are our *raison d'être* – that's what we exist for".

Just the facts, then: "My apprentices in workshop trades should have completed 200 hours of trade training so far this year. To date, I think they're averaging in the vicinity of 30 hours. That's just for this year. There's also the flow-on effect from the training that was missed out on last year.

"We've got people who have done in excess of 300 days [in Operation Protect] in the last two years. For anyone from Linton, those days are all away from home because none of the hotels were in Palmerston North. Regardless of whether you've got kids, you're leaving a life behind. There are single people who are not able to form relationships because they're not physically in one location for any length of time."

And for people with partners and children?

"One of the anecdotal comments I heard was, 'Do you not love me any more? You keep going away'."

The numbers, says Alexander, "don't quite tell the story in terms of the burden it had on people".

Three Thursdays ago, the Government announced New Zealand was reopening to the world and isolation requirements were being scrapped. By the end of June, the 32 MIQ facilities would be reduced to four, and workers from the Defence Force, Health, Aviation Security and other agencies would return to their home organisations.

The military has estimated the upfront cost of its involvement in MIQ at \$94.8 million annually, but its legacy casts a longer shadow.

The Defence Force head, Air Marshal Kevin Short, says he does "agree to quite an extent" that the work has contributed to resignations.

"Some people found that disruption from home life was not to their liking. Add to that, they're not doing their core skill training, which might be a carpentry, electrician or mechanic's role, and they're also not doing the military training they used to do ...

"And then you look outside the military, and there is a very strong labour market and a big demand for skilled people ... I listened to an advert on the radio for plumbers and they were offering a \$20,000 bonus and the salaries were higher than ours ... These young men and women are very skilled, so they decide to leave the Defence Force for other opportunities."

This time last year, the attrition rate for all regular force personnel sat at just under 8 per cent. Currently for the Navy and Air Force it's just over 9 per cent and for the Army, which contributed more than half of all Operation Protect staff, it's at 13.7 per cent.

Some trades have been especially hard hit. Short says that in the past three months alone, the Army has lost 36 per cent of its plumbers. Meanwhile, a quarter of the Air Force's machine tool setters and operators have left and the Navy has 15 per cent fewer marine technicians.

"When we lose a skilled person who is fully trained who might have been with us six or eight years, it's going to take six or eight years to get that person back."

When Helen Thomas' husband started talking about resigning his post at Linton, she didn't argue.

"For nearly 12 years I have been a very proud military partner - the rock at home providing stability and normality in support of an unpredictable Army career. I've kept the home fires burning for when my soldier needs it most, when he needs to know that at home everything is okay and will be okay.

"I've never once said no to a deployment, overseas trip, exercise, or posting. I've never asked him to put us before doing what he loves - which is proudly serving New Zealand - even when it meant I gave up dreams, goals, or careers. I've weathered the changes in him over time that come with active service."

But that first year of Operation Protect?

"It has been the hardest of our relationship - harder than any other deployment, including the deployment where he left for an active war zone when our son was 9 months old and returned when he was 16 months old, missing a lot of firsts like walking, Christmas and a birthday."

In the first 12 months of Op Protect, says Thomas, her husband was home for just 12 weeks. He underwent more than 30 old-school nasal swab tests. And, while soldiers received a \$25.82 allowance for the days they were away (increased to \$45.19 if they were not authorised to return home during stand down or respite periods), it was, unlike allowances paid for overseas operations, taxed.

Factor in extra costs like coffees and meals (soldiers ate hotel meals on their shifts, but otherwise fended for themselves) and Thomas says her household has never been so poor - "financially, mentally, even, simply, time-poor".

And yet: "They still do it. And they would still do it. He would do it all over again. They signed up to serve, and this gave them the chance to do their bit in a pandemic that they feel quite helpless to do anything about. As a partner, I'm proud of it too.

"The exhaustion and discontent comes from the fact this has been carried out at a high level of intensity for the Army and their families for such a long time. A deployment overseas is generally six to eight months long, with set allowances that are tax-free, no other 'work' obligations, set stand-down and limits on turnaround once home, and the families are supported."

Thomas says it's clear Defence personnel needed to step in to make MIQ work - but soldiers and their families should have received more recognition and tangible support.

"This is uncharted territory for the Defence Force, a whole new type of operation different to anything in the past or anything written in their books of 'how-to' ... Short-term we could just pull our socks up, complain to one another and carry on. Longer-term, though, it could not be ignored.

"If my husband had left, the Army would have lost years of training, experience, skills and knowledge. It might only take six months to a year to replace his boots through recruitment, but it would take a lot longer to replace the asset."

That asset now lives in Waiouru, with a new role that has no Operation Protect commitments. It's a long way from the supermarkets and coffee shops of his previous post.

"Ironically for our quality of life, Waiouru was the place to go. I never thought I'd say that!"

In the military, patches identify a person's trade, task, or rank. The Operation Protect patch depicts Aotearoa as a honeycomb - many bees working together toward a common goal - flanked by a sprig of mānuka, long valued for its healing benefits.

Navy warrant officer Dean Fielding wears his MIQ service on his sleeve and counts himself lucky. He discharged in 2016 after 28 years in service, working in Marlborough's mussel industry before buying Marlborough Wine Tours with his wife Jess. Pre-Covid, he says, they had built a solid business. Their daughter Aleisha turned 4 the day before this interview.

"We repositioned ourselves to be non-military. We wanted to be working for ourselves instead of the man."

Fielding maintained his military connections as a reservist. When New Zealand locked down and he lost 80 per cent of his business, the offer of MIF work was a godsend. Eventually, he took on a full-time role with an overview of several hotels - including the Holiday Inn Auckland Airport Hotel, which housed positive community cases.

"Right back at the start, managers like myself were having to design and put in place standard operating procedures, because there weren't any ... every hotel was laid out differently, elevators were a massive headache. Auckland's SO Hotel, for example, was 15 floors and three elevators. The Holiday Inn was only two levels, but it was a massive 32,000sq m site."

With the exception of Auckland's long stint at level 4 ("the rest of the country have no idea what Auckland's gone through!") his rotations were weekly and, every seven days, he flew home.

"It was unsettling. Quite simply, I didn't want to bring Covid home. It was the unknown. But we trusted in our infection prevention control measures, and it worked ... the measures covered our backsides."

Deployments, says Fielding, are not unfamiliar territory for military personnel.

"We go away. The ship sails, and the ship is away for a week or four months or five months. The unknown was walking into a facility and not having structures and procedures in place. Not knowing what was going to happen next.

"It wasn't an 8-5 operation. We'd have flights coming in at 6am and at midnight we were still bringing people into the hotel ... there were returnees with mental health issues, anxiety, depression. There were drug addictions. We're not trained for all that stuff, but that's where we got to - providing support for those people while they were locked in a room for 14 days."

Fielding says the requirement to take in community cases came with 48 hours' notice.

"We weren't ready for what was to come next. Look, a month into that Auckland outbreak, we started to see the real effects of the homeless, the gangs, and those that weren't onside with New Zealand law coming into the facilities. That's when we really started to see what abuse really is."

He won't repeat the taunts that were shouted relentlessly from balconies.

"The verbal abuse when we were stopping people from trying to escape was constant, but I only know of one occasion where a Navy guy was swung at. He dealt with the situation quite quickly, and we had police on site."

Twice weekly PCR tests. The stigma of telling friends back home he'd been living in Covid central. The constant uncertainty. It was not, says Fielding, like any other operation he has taken part in.

"But this is not all one-sided. The military gave me an opportunity to continue to provide for my family and there are thousands of Kiwis without jobs now, for whatever reasons."

And there was one night, a while back, when he was at Holiday Inn and the phone rang. A returnee from Britain had ordered 20 pizzas for MIQ staff. The next night, the man's daughter arranged for a delivery of McDonald's.

"The flowers, the thank you notes - I think that gets lost. A lot of people went through MIQ and came out the other end happier for it, because they knew they had done their bit."

Private Luke Drennan is a movement operator for the Army. He's 26 and lives in barracks at Linton. During Operation Protect, he did stints as a MIF assistant and on security details, working in Hamilton, Auckland and Rotorua.

"I don't have kids and I don't have a missus, so I was just focused on saving all my money and not having to worry about back home too much. But there were a lot of people with young kids, partners - everyone knows someone who had a falling out with their partner over it.

"People think the Army is this huge organisation with all this capability, but in reality we're quite a small organisation and there were a lot of people committed to Op Protect. Mechanics, chefs, truck drivers - it's not just infantry or artillery."

Drennan says if there weren't enough privates to do entry-level work, higher-ranked corporals and occasionally even sergeants would be pulled in.

Meanwhile, back home, camp life changed irrevocably. The overall imperative to "protect the force" meant soldiers returning from a rotation had to self-isolate for up to seven days. Social and sporting activities went on hold; much-anticipated events like the Soldier's Lunch, where senior officers do the serving, didn't happen.

"It was never going to be forever, but you definitely found yourself at 3am in some hotel sitting on the desk at the smoker's area and no one's there and you're thinking, 'what am I doing with my life?'

"It builds resilience. That's the Army in general. 'Hurry up and wait'. You have to sit around, you have to do your job, the job gets done and then you go home. Something I've learned along the way is you don't sit around and complain about it. You get on with it.

"How do I word this? I don't really know anyone who was disappointed that MIQ was going. That day we came to work and found out it was over, everyone was pretty happy."

Everyone, says Major Steve Macbeth, will have had a slightly different MIQ experience. He did two deployments to Rotorua and served in Operation Protect's task unit headquarters for a year.

"So I could tell you there were teams in one hotel who were super unhappy and the team next to them in another hotel was super happy. And the next week it would change ... but if your job is to be, say, a mechanic and fix heavy equipment, this is nowhere close to what you mentally, physically or emotionally prepare for."

He points to just one example of the wider cost of Covid to the Defence Force - in 2019, some 600 Kiwi personnel travelled to Talisman Sabre, a major, multi-country exercise hosted by the Australian military. Last year, the New Zealand contribution was just 16 people.

Macbeth belongs to the Queen Alexandra's Mounted Rifles Army unit. Figures supplied to the Weekend Herald showed most members of that unit completed between five and 12 deployments - 29,800 personnel days in total.

"Soldiers are a lot like athletes. They train for a game and they get told every once in a while that it's time to go into the same. It's very different to say 'okay, now the game is making sure people get the right type of food to their room' ...

"Yes, you should be out in the field jumping out of helicopters right now because that's what you do in the Army. Unfortunately, no one gets to choose the battle they're in, they have to fight the battle they've been given. Our national battle at this point in time, at this crossroads, was Covid."

Recommended for you

Refresh for more