



# Well schooled in hard knocks

## Emmet O'Rafferty

Chief executive  
of Top Security

AS a second-row forward with Leinster in the 1970s, Emmet O'Rafferty came within a sniff of an Ireland cap, these days however he is playing in a different league.

The owner and chief executive of Top Security, which earlier this month paid €3.75m to acquire two rivals in the South African market, says rugby gave him an understanding of what it takes to be successful off the field as well as on it.

"Rugby was great to me. It taught me all about standards and expectations," he said. "I was in a very strong Wanderers club team where winning was demanded."

O'Rafferty, 51, was educated at Castleknock College but, unlike most of his schoolmates, he did not go on to third-level education as he was "always more interested in sport than academia". After leaving school he worked in a variety of sales jobs before finding a job at Berger Paints in Coolock, where the 21-year-old helped to set up the customer services department.

"I was with very good people there who taught me a lot. The experience you can get at that age is terrific if you're willing to learn. In Berger all the problems came back to me so you learn a lot about what goes wrong in a business and how to put it right," he said.

He founded Top Security in 1979 more by accident than design after a stint using his not inconsiderable frame to deter would-be miscreants on the Dublin nightclub scene. The company now employs more than 1,500 people in Dublin, Cork and Johannesburg, having

expanded to South Africa in 1994.

The latest acquisitions in South Africa, which O'Rafferty said would firmly establish the company in the top three security firms in that country's

armed response market, cap a busy period for the company. Top Security paid €7m earlier this year for Systemhouse Technology, an Irish firm specialising in IT security.

"The risks in the virtual world are the same as those in the physical world but the tools to combat it are different," he said. "Stealing, vandalism and the like happen over the internet too and you must have policies and procedures to deal with them."

O'Rafferty acknowledges the security industry has something of an image problem but insists it is unjustified.

"By its very nature, people are sceptical of it because it is intangible in ways, but people have no idea of what goes into delivering a service — static guards, control centres, alarms, CCTV and the rest. People will quite happily leave their offices on a Friday evening with all their property inside and forget about it because they know it's safe. That's quite a responsibility."

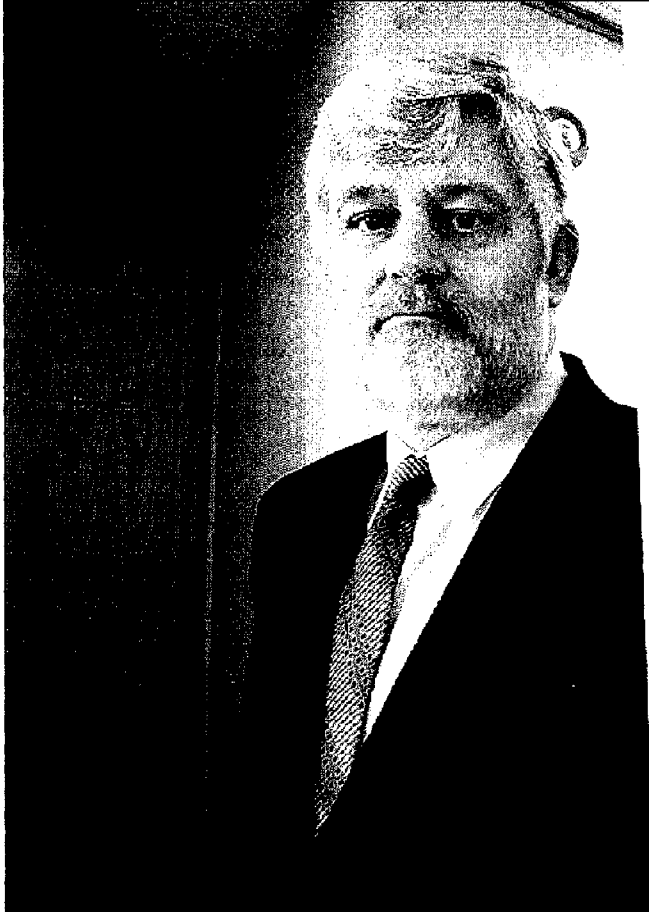
O'Rafferty built Top Security, which showed an operating profit of €644,182 on sales of €9.2m for the year to the end of February, from the ground up. In the early years, he continued to work part-time on security contracts on the ground to fund organic growth.

He insists there is no secret formula to building a successful business other than honesty and "sheer bloody-minded commitment". He also says he has been lucky enough to surround himself with mentors who have continued to lend guidance over the years.

As for rugby, business commitments and constant travel between Ireland and South Africa mean he doesn't have the time to coach but he still follows the game avidly.

"It is something I will always love," he said.

Bryan Meade



**Keeping watch:  
O'Rafferty's security firm  
is expanding abroad**

