

Blast survivors still in dark as pressure mounts for answers

By Brock Weir

During a recent trade mission to Mexico, Prime Minister Stephen Harper took some time out of his trip to lay a wreath at Niños Héroes, a monument to six 'Heroic Cadets' who were killed during the Mexican-American War.

It was a time to remember the fallen, but for a select group of people back home, it was a 'slap in the face' not just to the memory of six Canadian cadets killed in an explosion at CFB Valcartier in the summer of 1974, but to over 50 of the injured men 'then boys' who were left almost on their own to deal with the resulting trauma.

One of the surviving cadets is Aurora's Gerry Fostaty, an author who has dedicated the most recent years of his life to advocating for those living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) stemming from the incident, and PTSD cases nation-wide.

For decades, Fostaty, and those who were in the group that day have been searching for answers on how a routine training exercise for cadets could have turned so deadly.

During a demonstration session on weapons and dangers in the field, a live grenade somehow got mixed into the box of blanks. Inevitably, one of the cadets pulled the pin and the resulting explosion killed six and injured 54 others.

In the aftermath, the Cadets were told by the superiors that it was business as usual, says Fostaty. They were not given any support, therapy, or a pat on the back. Most importantly, 40 years later, they have no answers or recognition that the event actually took place.

Hope, he says, came last fall when NDP Members of Parliament Nycole Turmel and Jack Harris took up the cause, pressing Defence Minister Rob Nicholson to authorise his Ministry's ombudsman to investigate the case. In a subsequent meeting, Fostaty had a meeting with Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown, who said she would take the case to Nicholson and Harper, but there has been near-complete silence since the fall.

This week, the NDP will formally launch a petition urging Nicholson to get the ball rolling on the investigation to help the survivors recover from 'the physical and mental wounds of this horrific event.'

'Acknowledgement that this happened is extremely important,' Fostaty tells The Auroran. 'There are boys who are still suffering, still have shrapnel in their bodies, and need the acknowledgement that they acted responsibly. There are an enormous number of people who are carrying around guilt because of this.'

'Last fall, there was a sense of hope [that something would be done]. The problem is cadets are not seen to be a part of the Canadian Forces, despite at the time they were being housed, clothed, fed, and were compelled to be a part of this lecture. They are not considered parts of the Canadian Forces, so they cannot take advantage of services offered by Veterans Affairs.'

All they want, they say, is some degree of closure; whether, yes, the Ministry will authorise the ombudsman to do its investigation or, no, it is not going to go any further. For some of the survivors, however, the Prime Minister's tribute to the Mexican cadets was almost too much to bear.

'I didn't know what to think,' says Fostaty. 'When the boys email me and ask what I think, I have no response. How can I possibly respond to that? It felt like a slap in the face.'

'We have been told the Prime Minister is aware of this file and was aware of the situation. I am sure, politically, it was wonderful to acknowledge the Mexican military when you are doing a trade mission there but, at the same time, it was the identical number and they were, in fact, cadets. It was very painful.'

Both sides of the House of Commons agree, however, that they don't want this to become a ?political issue.? Brown says she has been in regular contact with Harris about the file, as well as having had discussions with Nicholson over the Valcartier event. She says she anticipates movement on the file shortly.

?I have spoken to Minister Nicholson and there has been an ombudsman who has been appointed with this file and I anticipate that in the very near future we will see some movement on this,? says Brown. ?The minister is very, very concerned about it.?

To view the NDP's petition, visit petition.ndp.ca/valcartier-cadets-need-your-help.