

# Blast survivor encouraged by Ombudsman's findings

By Brock Weir

The Ministry of National Defence should award "immediate and reasonable" financial compensation to victims involved in a 1974 grenade blast at CFB Valcartier, which left 16 cadets dead, and scores of others injured, says the Ombudsman for the Department.

Ombudsman Gary Walborne released his report into the historic explosion on Tuesday following years of campaigning led by survivors looking for answers, including Aurora's Gerry Fostaty, who, as a cadet, was an instructor when the blast took place.

The deadly explosion occurred during a training exercise for 137 cadets stationed at the Quebec base. During a lesson on explosive devices, a live grenade mistakenly mixed in with the dummies and, believing the device was inert, one of the cadets pulled the pin.

Mr. Fostaty, then 18, told The Auroran he was just walking into the room when the grenade went off, changing his life, and the lives of everyone in the room, in the blink of an eye. Over 100 people were sent to hospital and those young leaders who were able had to get the boys to safety and in the ambulance amidst the confusion, not knowing exactly what had happened.

That was a question which lingered over his mind, and the minds of survivors, for over 40 years "but a degree of clarity has arrived with the Ombudsman's report. An investigation carried out by the Department of National Defence (DND) was a long-held hope for Mr. Fostaty and the others to "set the record straight" on just what happened that summer day "and to provide insight on adequate compensation for those still struggling with the events, including those, like Mr. Fostaty, living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"Cadets were treated with absolute disregard for 40 years now and left to their own devices," said Mr. Fostaty. "It is shocking what happened to some of them. For the boys that need help, we would like to see them get that help."

Everyone at the time, he recalled, thought the powers-that-be in the military thought everyone else was going to handle the incident, but nobody did. The incident was soon swept under the rug and forgotten, he said, but that was a tall order for those who were there.

It was a sentiment shared this week by the Ombudsman. In his investigation, Mr. Walborne said the investigation's objective was to determine whether those present on the day were "treated in a fair and compassionate manner based on the standards in place at the time of the incident" and whether the DND had any present-day responsibility towards the survivors.

They found surviving cadets continue to suffer from physical and psychological injuries and did not receive "assistance on par" with what was offered other military members impacted. It is against the "principle of fairness" to provide assistance, compensation and benefits to one group and not the other and more should have been done to assist the boys.

The report recommends the Minister of National Defence offer immediate assessments to "all those who claim to have been adversely or permanently affected by the incident to determine the physical and psychological care required" and fund a reasonable care plan. Immediate financial compensation is also recommended.

"[The incident left many cadets] with long-lasting and life-altering injuries for which they received inadequate treatment and/or compensation," said Mr. Walborne. "The manner in which cadets were made to testify as if they were adult Canadian Forces witnesses "they were neither "before the Board of Inquiry into the incident left many young cadets feeling responsible, distraught and further traumatized. While 1974 legislation may have limited the possible courses of actions, the DND and the Canadian Forces still had a responsibility to the children under their care. More should have been done.

"The most vulnerable group affected by the incident was also the least supported."

Following Tuesday's announcement, Mr. Fostaty said he was encouraged by the recommendations.

"I am very happy to see the Ombudsman's report," he said. "Their recommendations are exactly what we were hoping to see. Defence Minister Jason Kenney has said the government will accept and implement all the recommendations and I am happy to hear that. That being said, this is an election year and I am hoping that after the election, whomever forms the government will follow through with the Minister's promise."

A further review will also be launched later this year by the Ombudsman of the current Canadian Cadet program to identify any potential existing issues of unfairness with a mandate of making recommendations on how the program can be improved.