

Blast survivor hopes he's closer to finding 40-year-old answers



By Brock Weir

In the summer of 1974, 18-year-old Gerry Fostaty was a young army cadet leader at CFB Valcartier, Quebec.

As a newly minted Platoon Sergeant, it was an appointment which would ultimately alter the course of his life. He was among the leaders of a group of cadets, mostly between the ages of 14 and 16, putting them through their paces so they could go back to their home units and, in turn, take up their own leadership positions.

Fate, however, had other plans.

Part of the training entailed an explosives training course where cadets were shown dummies built to look like explosives in order to be able to identify the real thing if they encountered them in the field. Somehow, a live grenade, however, got mixed into the box circulating among the cadets and, inevitably, the pin was eventually pulled.

The resulting explosion killed six cadets and sent over 100 others to hospital, out of the nearly 140 in the room that day. Mr. Fostaty was walking into the room as the grenade went off, and his life changed in a split second. He and many of the other leaders who were still able, had to get the boys to safety, load them into ambulances, all amid the confusion of not knowing exactly what had happened.

These questions, however, remain to this day.

The group was told by superiors it was 'business as usual' in the immediate aftermath, but that was easier said than done. There was no comfort or counselling, he recalls, and even fewer answers. Some of the boys there that day continue to struggle, as men, in the aftermath of the explosion. Some have physical and neurological problems, others can feel the effects with every step they take with shrapnel still embedded in their bodies. Others, like Mr. Fostaty, now an Aurora resident, live every day with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Now a passionate advocate for PTSD support, Mr. Fostaty says he hopes the 'boys' there that day took a step forward this week, however tentative, in finally getting questions answered on just what took place, and receiving 'redress' for the decades of silence.

He was one of two survivors who joined New Democrat MPs in Ottawa on Monday for a press conference calling for justice for Canada's 'forgotten cadets.'

‘For almost four decades, these cadets have been ignored, silenced, forgotten,’ said MP Jack Harris, Official Opposition Defence Critic, in a statement. ‘We are urging Minister Rob Nicholson to allow this investigation to move forward so that survivors finally receive recognition and redress. Four decades later, many former cadets are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and need help.’

Their press conference stemmed from communication by Ombudsman Pierre Daigle to Minister Nicholson, calling for authorisation to investigate the case. A response, they say, is still outstanding.

Former interim opposition leader Nycole Turmel added the Minister's agreement to having the Ombudsman investigate the case is ‘essential’ in setting the record straight.

‘We would like the Minister to approve the investigation for the Ombudsman to do an impartial investigation into the situation,’ Mr. Fostaty tells The Auroran. ‘I am quite confident they will find something has to be done for the boys who are still suffering.’

‘I would like, first of all, to see the incident acknowledged. Unfortunately, the incident has fallen into the realm of urban legend now. People now don't even think it happened because it sounds like something that would have taken place in a third world country, not Canada.’

Mr. Fostaty says he would also like to see an apology, not only for the explosion itself, but also for how the boys were treated afterwards.

‘They were treated with absolute disregard for almost 40 years now and left to their own devices. It is shocking what happened to some of them. This is the kind of thing we would like to see happen and, of course, for the boys that need help, we would like to see them get that help.’

Mr. Fostaty says he's being ‘kind’ in believing the powers that be at the time thought everyone else was going to handle the incident, but nobody did. It was a different time, he argues, and people think differently today about the long-term health effects of such an incident.

‘Then, it was just forgotten,’ he says. ‘Now, I kind of think they just wish it would go away.’

As for Monday's press conference, Mr. Fostaty says it was nice to finally have someone ‘in their corner’ after they have hit so many brick walls.

‘Eventually, that starts to wear you down, thinking there is nothing that can be done and nobody cares,’ he says.

Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown tells The Auroran of her ‘horror’ at learning the story shared by Mr. Fostaty and the boys. She is meeting with him in the first half of November to hear more about his concerns, concerns which she says she plans to take to Minister Nicholson.

‘I was a teenager and I have never heard this story before,’ she says. ‘How does this happen?’

‘When I say I look forward to meeting [Mr. Fostaty], perhaps that is the wrong way to express it, but I would like to hear his story. My word, it is horrific, but I need to know more. I haven't had a chance to speak to the Minister yet, but I have voiced my concerns to his office and asked for an opportunity to meet with him after I have spoken to Mr. Fostaty.’