

Men and women of the Queen's York Rangers feted for the work they do on the home front



By Brock Weir

Sgt. Ryan Mitchell and Master Corporal Rob Skelly thought they were being pretty macho signing up as members of the Queen's York Rangers.

Both men, sixteen and seventeen at the time, thought it would be a pretty cool way to pass the weekend, a rite of passage, perhaps even the next logical step on the road to manhood. And that might have been the case, if they didn't have to get a bit of a boost from mom.

'I was under the age of 18 and needed parental consent to move on with this ceremony of manhood, so my mom had to join me!' recalled Skelly, before a packed banquet hall at the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion on Thursday night as the community paid tribute to the work the Queen's York Rangers do here in Canada and, specifically, at the community level.

'Most of us are expecting a noble reason [on why I enlisted], but I have to finally, publically, admit why I joined,' continued Skelly. 'It was a high school co-op program when I was 16. One of my best friends was joining the co-op program and I was looking for a four credit, easy way out of Grade 11 and he approached me with this Queen's York Rangers outline of what we were going to be doing, [including] throwing grenades.

'Stupid idiot,' I said, 'they're not going to let us throw grenades!' Anyway, it turns out they did! We swore in on February 18, 2004, and I haven't looked back since. It was by accident, and it is a unique story, but my country and my unit has kept me in this far along. Now the story is out!'

A cross-section of the community, including veterans, dignitaries ranging from the mayors of Aurora and Newmarket, Councillors, and citizens at large, had the opportunity to hear many of these stories first hand from the serving Queen's York Rangers officers and cadets in attendance last week. Although event organizers did not give ticket holders the chance to throw a few pieces of weaponry around as Skelly got to experience in his formative years as a Ranger, they had the opportunity to get a handle on their guns, equipment, and try on the weight of their packs.

'I don't know if my story is as entertaining as that, but with most 16-year-old teens, I had the infinite wisdom and wealth of knowledge that they all do,' recalled Master Corporal Harrison with a chuckle. 'Somebody brought [the Rangers] up to me and said, 'They'll let you in, you can go and fire some rifles and do this.' I would like to say they were noble reasons [why I joined] but it just

sounded cool at the time! After joining up, and going on nine years with the unit, it is the camaraderie that I formed with the men and women I work with that has kept me in it now.?

While Harrison was proudly wearing the General Campaign Star for Southwest Asia in recognition of his active service in Afghanistan, focus was drawn to the everyday training these reservists do at home, particularly here in Aurora. Dubbed 'O Canada: We Stand on Guard for Thee?', that wasn't just a theme pulled out of a hat. It is very true as the Rangers are here, on hand, to serve in any eventuality.

'The men and women of the Queen's York Rangers, from its roots in the Revolutionary War, through two World Wars, Afghanistan, and numerous peacekeeping operations abroad, have won numerous battle honours in recognition of their skill, courage and sacrifice,' said Prime Minister Stephen Harper, whose words were delivered by Kelvin Brown, husband of Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown. 'I would like to commend the members of the Rangers, past and present, for upholding the tradition of service and loyalty that exemplifies their Regiment. You have earned the respect and appreciation of all Canadians.'

A similar view was offered by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard, who offered video greetings to the event. As a father whose son has served in the Regiment, he paid tribute not only to the Rangers and their families, but also to the people who gathered that evening to show their support for the Queen's York Rangers Regimental Assistance Fund, which provides support for soldiers and their loved ones.

'I [recently] thought back on a day I brought greetings to the Rangers at their stand-down parade held in Aurora's historic Town Park,' said Mr. Ballard. 'It was a beautiful spring morning, the air was cool, the sky was clear, bright sunshine filtered through the trees and onto the parade ground. As I watched the men and women march past I was drawn to their feet marching in perfect order. It was a sobering moment. How many soldiers have marched on that very same sod in Town Park since the Regiment was located here? Where have those soldiers gone after learning the basics here in Aurora? How many did not come back? Watching my son march with A Squadron really drove that point home.'

In his remarks, Mayor Geoff Dawe said Thursday was a 'great opportunity to show [the community] in a very tangible way the support for the Queen's York Rangers.

'It is a very important part of how we, as residents of this particular area, can give back to the Queen's York Rangers, who have given so much to us,' he said.

This point was underscored Sandy Rumball on behalf of the Royal Canadian Legion, who presented event organizers and emcees Kimberley Kerr and Sgt. Mitchell a cheque for \$5,000 to further the work of the fund.

'I can assure you that all funds donated to the Rangers are a treasured commodity with the Council,' said Ms. Kerr, a member of the Regimental Council. 'No funds are disbursed without thorough examination or discussion. The Council meets at Fort York and is kept up to date on all aspects of the Queen's York Rangers, their training, their service and equipment.'