

Competing visions put rifle range in their sights

While the town of Grimsby, facing a dwindling supply of land, was hoping to see the site turned over to it for a long sought-after lakefront trail and park, the military's \$2.2-million plan calls for a new forward operating base 'modelled right out of Afghanistan'

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GRIMSBY, ONT. — From his observation post above the forward operating base, Major David DeVries can see them closing in from the south: new, two-storey homes, in tidy formation, marching steadily in his direction.

To his eye, the new neighbours should be friend, not foe. After all, the Winona Rifle Range has been here for 71 years, training the soldiers upon whose backs the suburban Canadian dream was built, and who continue to serve and die in Afghanistan today.

But these days, the old range is facing fresh fire, and it's not entirely friendly, despite the name of a key opponent, the Friends of the Waterfront Committee. The group wants the site turned over to the Town of Grimsby for a lakefront trail and park, and the town's mayor, faced with rapid growth and a dwindling supply of land, more or less agrees.

To add to their woes, they only recently learned, through the local paper, no less, that the military is marching precisely in the opposite direction. It has undertaken \$2.2-million in enhancements to the range, including an Afghanistan-style forward operating base, rappelling tower, mock village, obstacle course and troop shelter, which hardly suggests surrender.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Major David DeVries stands in one of the watch towers of the base, with some of the neighbours seen in the background. (*Peter Power/The Globe and Mail*)



"The town, for years, has been under a mandate from the residents to get more public access to the waterfront," Mayor Bob Bentley said in an interview this week. "There are very few fast-growing communities in the [Greater Toronto Area] that actually have a training facility with live ammunition being shot off where the general public is."

Maybe so, but southwestern Ontario also has few places for 2,200 reserve soldiers, who comprise the 31 Canadian Brigade Group, to train on weekends without losing precious hours driving to full-time bases in Meaford and Petawawa, officials say. And training has become all the more crucial since the Afghan mission began in 2002.

Hence the improvements at Winona and at the Cedar Springs Rifle Range near Chatham, which similarly looks out over Lake Erie.

"Everything we've got here, we took the model right out of Afghanistan," Major DeVries said, standing in a freshly erected observation post overlooking Winona's new forward operating base, enclosed by the same fortified barriers that protect soldiers overseas.

In the past 2½ years, the brigade has deployed about 400 reservists to Afghanistan, Sudan, Sierra Leone and Congo, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew Butters, the group's chief of staff, said on Tuesday. That same day, Warrant Officer Dennis Brown of the Lincoln and Welland Regiment near Grimsby and a past user of the Winona range, was killed by a roadside bomb with two other soldiers.

The death was mentioned, with trademark military brevity and detachment, at the start of a public meeting Wednesday night at the Grimsby branch of the Royal Canadian Legion. Mr. Bentley, a few town councillors and a handful of residents gathered for a briefing on the range improvements, delivered by Major Peter Voyer, who oversees training for the brigade, and Major DeVries, who acts as the landlord for military sites around southwestern Ontario.

"As we stand here in a very safe environment, approximately 3,000 of our soldiers are in Afghanistan right now, in harm's way, with bad

guys who want to kill them," Major Voyer said, laying it out in blunt terms.

Major DeVries followed up with a softer, hearts-and-minds approach, outlining how the Winona range property has flourished as a wildlife refuge under the military's keen stewardship.

Sounding more like environmentalist David Suzuki than Douglas MacArthur, the American general who fought in three wars, he rhymed off a list of bird species, from the tufted titmouse and black tern to the least bittern - "the equivalent of the panda" in Canada for their rarity - that have taken up residence around rehabilitated former sewage lagoons on the site.

Those birds, along with turtles, coyotes and other creatures, could be at risk if the site is put to other uses, he said earlier in an interview.

Mr. Bentley, first out of the gate after the presentation, did his best to strike a conciliatory tone, citing military training as "an absolute necessity" and even conceding that the sound of gunfire, which "can be heard through the whole town," is tolerable.

"Noise we can get over, but not having access to the waterfront" is the issue, Mr. Bentley said. "We have been working for a number of years to try and complete the waterfront trail. We've had no luck."

In the end, the only bit of luck the mayor would see came when Major DeVries invited him to submit a detailed proposal on how a trail, open only on non-training days, might work. But the officer was clear that he can't make the final call and promised only to hand any trail plan up the chain of command.

The mayor, while mildly heartened, was under no illusions about who holds the key to his coveted waterfront, growth pressures or not.

"They wear the uniforms and they've got those guns," he said, "and I'm unarmed except for 25,000 people who want access to the lake."

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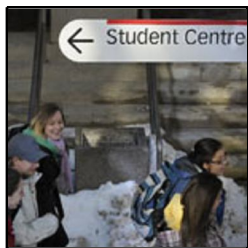
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