Master warrant officer Richard Grant and his daughter.

LETTING DOWN THEIR GUARD

Living with "civvies" has changed the military

by Will Gibson · Photos by Pieter de Vos

Whether he's marching through the aisles at the supermarket or pacing the sidelines while coaching his son's indoor soccer team, there's a crisp hospital-corner precision to Richard Grant's bearing. The 48 year old comes by his starched neatness honestly; it's standard procedure after 24 years in the Canadian Forces. Grant's spit-and-polish stands out amid Morinville's relaxed casualness, but there are more and more people like him in the community, once a French-Canadian farming town and now a modern suburb of 6,300 just northwest of Edmonton.

Morinville's evolution from agrarian centre to bedroom community accelerated in 1994, when the federal government decided to locate its westernmost army "super-base" about 20 kilometres southeast of the town. Since Grant's family moved here in 1996, mottled-green combat fatigues have become as common as the denim overalls of farmers on mainstreet. Longtime residents appreciate the sharp rise in the value of their homes and the increased pool of hockey coaches, as well as the new stores which serve the growing population. But some old-timers aren't comfortable with all the changes wrought by the military's increased presence in a town where every school remains Roman Catholic and Sunday's 10:30 a.m. mass at St. Jean Baptiste parish is still celebrated in French.

Derelict building at Griesbach Barracks, in north Edmonton.

Morinville is one of several Alberta communities with a deep military imprint. The Department of National Defence spent $771-million in Alberta for 2001/02 (the latest year DND itemized its budget by province), including $337-million for its Edmonton garrison, which employs 4,500 regular force soldiers, 500 reservists and another 500 civilian employees. Nearby Morinville feels the economic dividends—and a little tugging at its social fabric. All those men in uniform change places like Morinville, Cold Lake and Wainwright, just as a mill or a mine would. But while the military transforms its home communities, a deeper relationship with "civvies" has also changed the military.

Military outreach programs "recruited" small-town politicians in Alberta to muster community support.

Gone now is any tolerance for the "boys will be boys" culture. Today's military—stung by political fallout from wrongdoings of troops in the early 1990s and the ensuing media backlash—puts a premium on projecting a good image, which is why community service has become part of every soldier's performance assessment. And it's why the stereotypical crusty old salts swearing a blue streak are a minority, replaced by men and women like master warrant officer Grant, who speaks and acts more like a modern middle manager than a soldier.

THE NAMAO BASE NEAR MORINVILLE was built by Americans in 1941 to fly staff and supplies to Alaska and Russia. "When it was an air base, they didn't have much to do with outside communities," says Gib Boddez, who dealt with the brass as the top administrator of the Municipal District of Sturgeon, which bounds the base on three sides. "It was off-limits and they looked after everything. Most of the military lived on the base, not in outside communities." They pretty much kept to themselves, an attitude which prevailed 10 years later when the Royal Canadian Air Force took over, opening the curtains only for occasional events like air shows and Pope John Paul II's mass for 125,000 people in 1984.

That insular attitude was shed in the mid-1990s when Namao switched from air force blue to army green as part of a massive federal restructuring. Ottawa transferred about 1,000 air force personnel from Edmonton to Winnipeg and Trenton, Ontario, and announced that 3,000 troops stationed in Calgary and 500 in Chilliwack, B.C., would move to Alberta's capital. Namao's land would become one of four army super-bases along with Val Cartier (Quebec), Petawawa (Ontario) and Gagetown (New Brunswick).

The military wasn't getting much good press at the time, facing plenty of public outrage over the death of Shidane Arone at the hands of Canadian Airborne Regiment soldiers on peacekeeping duties in Somalia. Bruised by images of out-of-control troops, political and military officials did some immediate damage control and disbanded the Airborne. Then they got to work on the military's blind eye toward trouble, which was creating public relations disasters. They realized there was value in both transparency and greater ties to the outside community.

Rather than act unilaterally, outreach programs "recruited" small-town politicians in Alberta and elsewhere to muster community support. "Right from the start, they were great in keeping the towns informed about new developments," says Brent Melville, a two-term town councillor in Morinville. Some municipal politicians began lobbying on behalf of the military in the media and in Ottawa (which proved useful during budget talks). And then incoming soldiers came looking for off-base housing.

Morinville and other Edmonton-area communities set up booths at an exposition for soldiers in Chilliwack, where it caught the attention of Kim Grant, Richard's wife. Small-town life appealed to Kim, who grew up in Okotoks in the 1960s and '70s. The family found a roomy two-storey house on a quiet cul-de-sac in Morinville for $124,000, a bargain compared to the B.C. lower mainland or Vancouver, where Richard had been raised. "In Chilliwack, we lived on a busy street and the kids couldn't even play in the front yard," says Kim. "Morinville was perfect for us."

More soldiers arrived as talk of the town's army-friendly attitude and amenities spread through "rumour control," the grapevine employed by military families, who were impressed by the "Welcome Military" signs. "We lived in Chilliwack for four years and knew only one of our neighbours," says Kim. "Here, within a week, everybody in the cul-de-sac had called to welcome us." Even Richard—who considered Chilliwack slow freight after postings in Calgary, Toronto and a two-year embassy hitch in Beijing—now savours the small-town rhythm. "In Chilliwack, when we went on holidays, we always thought the house would be broken into when we got back," he says. "We have not heard a siren since we got here." When Richard spent six months as a peacekeeper in Bosnia last year, Kim would go outside to find their lawn mysteriously mowed or the driveway shoveled.

The Grants and other military families now make up about 10 per cent of Morinville's population, an influx which has rapidly driven up housing prices. "A lot of people in Morinville had a chance to sell an older house and build a new house," says Boddez. They also witnessed their francophone culture fading, and their town starting to look and feel like an anonymous suburb. It's understandable why locals drew a line in the sand and fought a traffic plan that would have ended angle parking downtown. Stung by criticism from groups such as the Catholic Women's League and the Knights of Columbus, town council agreed to retain one of the last symbols of small-town grace. But Melville believes Morinville won't have a choice in the future. "It's inevitable that there will be parallel parking and lights on main street," says Melville. "The military may have accelerated the decisions that needed to be made around growth. It is tough for people to go from a small town to a suburb, but you can't go back."

Political Minefields

In 1994, when the federal government decided to move 3,000 troops from Calgary to the newly consolidated army "super-base" in Edmonton, Premier Ralph Klein complained that Jean Chrétien's Liberal government was indulging in blatant political favouritism. Klein felt Ottawa was rewarding the Alberta capital for returning four Liberal MPs in the 1993 election, while Calgarians didn't elect any. An internal military report obtained by the Reform Party through the Access to Information Act gave credence to Klein's skepticism: high-ranking military officials had warned politicians that the move made neither economic nor military sense. (One section of the 148-page report detailed how Ottawa would spend $110.7-million on the Edmonton-headquarted Land Forces Western Area command between 1996 and 1999 to save $43.8-million.)

That wasn't the first time federal politicians have made curious decisions about military installations in Alberta. The practice has a long history. During the Great Depression Prime Minister R.B. Bennett approved Calgary's Currie Barracks, a $1.2-million project. Bennett, of course, was a Calgarian. Then Ottawa made a series of convoluted land deals with the Sarcee Band, now known as the Tsuu T'ina Nation. The Department of National Defence bought and leased hundreds of acres over the years. Military historian David Haas blames the paternalistic political climate of the early and mid 20th century for the proliferation of these pacts. "A lot of former military people wound up in Indian Affairs," explains Haas, a lawyer who spent more than 30 years in the regular forces and reserves as an intelligence officer. "So when somebody in DND needed land for a camp, he might call a buddy over in Indian Affairs."

But those deals weren't as embarrassing to Ottawa as the legacy of its 1994 base closure in Penhold, home of the Diefenbunker, the mammoth underground bomb shelter built in 1964. It had space for up to 300 people and featured all the amenities of a small college campus, including a cafeteria, nursing station, rec rooms, offices and a dormitory, all encased in two feet of concrete. When DND shut down Penhold, competing proposals for the facility's future ranged from a boot camp for young offenders to a grow operation for medicinal marijuana to a national prayer centre. Instead, the bunkers were sold to two Red Deer businessmen for $472,000 in 1995. Three years later, the government had to buy them back for $1.35-million when the new owners claimed the Hell's Angels had offered $1.3-million for the bunkers. Then the government paid a Calgary contractor $856,000 to demolish the bunkers in 2001 to ensure they wouldn't fall into the hands of security threats. *—Will Gibson*

WWW.DIEFENBUNKER.CA

The Diefenbunker Civil Operations Room. Fallout calculation.

DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

Alberta's Four Military Bases

Cold Lake

The largest airbase in Canada, Cold Lake covers about 8,850-km^2, including the Primrose Lake Air Weapons Range, now called Cold Lake Air Weapons Range. Located 230 km northeast of Edmonton and 10 km west of the Saskatchewan border, it opened in 1954 after the Royal Canadian Air Force chose the site for air weapons training because of its sparse population and flat terrain. The air base employs more than 2,000 military and 320 civilian workers. Canada is negotiating to have a permanent contingent of British pilots train on site. Expenditures for 2001/02 were $103-million.

Edmonton

Lancaster Park includes 2,534 hectares just northeast of city limits plus the 249-hectare Griesbach Barracks, a 10-minute drive south of city limits. The U.S. Army Air Corps built Lancaster air base in 1941 and the Royal Canadian Air Force took it over in 1951. In 1995, it changed from an air force base to an army super-base. Griesbach—named after Major General William Griesbach, a prominent Edmonton lawyer and city politician—started as an ordnance depot in 1950. It later housed an infantry unit, detention barracks and several militia units before being integrated into Lancaster Park. Today it has 4,500 regular-force soldiers, 500 reservists and 500 civilian employees. Expenditures in 2001/02 were $337-million, which included salaries, operations and maintenance budgets at the garrison.

Wainwright

Located 190 km east of Edmonton, this 540-km^2 training base opened in 1940 when the military took over Buffalo National Park as a wartime training facility. It was used as a POW camp at the end of the Second World War for about 1,000 German officers. Today it has 330 permanent military staff and 240 civilian employees. About 10,000 soldiers train at the base every year and another 60 students, many aboriginal, are hired every summer. A $137-million expansion is expected to increase the number of soldiers at the camp to 600. The military pays $23-million in salaries for troops stationed in Wainwright plus another $23-million annual operating expenses.

Suffield

This 2,690-km^2 training area is located 250 km southeast of Calgary and 50 km west of Medicine Hat. It opened in 1941 as a joint Canadian/British experimental station for chemical and biological defence testing. Canada's Defence Research Board assumed control in 1947. In 1971, the Canadian and British governments signed a 10-year agreement, now extended to 2006, allowing British Army troops to use Suffield for armoured, infantry and artillery training. There are 106 Canadian military and 191 civilian employees, 150 workers at the Defence Research and Development Canada, 206 British Army soldiers and 228 civilian workers at British Army Training Unit Suffield. In addition, between 150 and 300 temporary staff work at the base during summer training months. Combined salaries for permanent British and Canadian staff are $40-million, and the annual operating budget for the base is $75-million. Anywhere between 1,000 and 5,000 soldiers train at Suffield at any one time.

Top: Half an hour west of Medicine Hat, CFB Suffield is a 2,690-square-km training area for Canadian and British soldiers. **Middle**: cadets on a base tour. **Bottom**: members of the Bold Eagle program for aboriginal youth from western Canada, offered at CFB Wainwright every summer. It opens with a five-day culture camp, followed by six weeks of recruit training. Applicants must be at least 16. Participants earn roughly $3,000 each, and graduates can continue on with the military.

MORINVILLE, which largely houses the families of senior non-commissioned officers, is not exactly a microcosm of the military's footprint in Alberta. Training bases such as Suffield and Wainwright host thousands of rotating, transient troops every year. They too provide an economic injection, and an unexpected set of social concerns as well.

Residents of Wainwright, a farming community on Alberta's eastern prairie, have been living with soldiers since 1940 when the DND took over the 540-km^2 Buffalo National Park. Wainwright was a prisoner-of-war camp for Germans captured in the Second World War. Now, roughly 8,000 Canadian and 2,000 British soldiers spend time at Wainwright's Western Area Training Centre every year, mostly between April and September. About 330 military staff and 240 civilian workers are posted permanently in the town of 5,300. “Roughly 90 per cent of the people here that are married with children love Wainwright because it is a great family posting,” says Major Tim Isberg, the camp's deputy commanding officer. “You are five minutes from anywhere and the parking is always free.”

With a $137-million expansion set to nearly double permanent staff to 600 by 2007, Isberg now spends a lot of time talking about the increased number of students with the Buffalo Trail School Division and about the local housing market with town planners. Nothing in his 17-year career could have prepared the artillery officer and father of two for his role in the construction of a skateboard park for teenagers, but Isberg has been quick to shoulder such tasks because of the symbiotic relationship between town and camp. “In places like Edmonton and Cold Lake, they have everything on the base. Here, we rely on the town for everything from the swimming pool to the hockey rinks, infrastructure we don't have on the base,” says Isberg, who sits on the town's economic development board and chamber of commerce. “We are adding another 1,000 to 1,200 people to the town over the next two to three years. That wouldn't be noticed in Edmonton, but we have to help prepare the town.”

Wainwright hasn't always been prepared for incoming soldiers. There were some memorable barroom brawls in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, often when soldiers were celebrating the end of a major exercise. In the age of transparency, however, those rites of passage have been smothered out, with the military now policing its troops off base. Some merchants says this puritanism is costing them money. “Today, we are more likely to hear complaints from the local business community when we *don't* allow soldiers into the town,” says Isberg. “Our standards for behaviour are higher.”

In the late 1980s, Wainwright's Honeypot Eatery and Pub was deemed off-limits to soldiers on course at the base. Owner Alex Heath, a former British soldier who married a local woman, is still mad about the lost business. “Through the summer, about 65 per cent of our clientele will be military,” he says. “It's about 35 per cent the rest of the year. You don't hear about how there was a big fight on the weekend. That's something that hasn't happened in more than a decade.” Indeed, military police and the Wainwright RCMP have forged a partnership to ensure soldiers stay out of trouble. They've designated Wuzzy's, a bar favoured by 18- and 19-year-old civvies, a no-go zone for soldiers. “We don't see the old type of brawls or the locals waiting for a drunk soldier,” says Sergeant Steve Visnoski, who heads Wainwright's 10-man RCMP detachment. “I've been here about 15 months and it's actually been pretty good.”

Nothing in his 17-year career could have prepared the artillery officer for building a skateboard park for teens.

THE APPROACH IS SIMILAR IN MEDICINE HAT, where British military police ride along in civilian police cars to patrol the bars as thirsty British soldiers flock in from their training facility at Suffield, about 50 kilometres from the city of 53,000. Locals no longer warn out-of-town civilians to avoid the “Sin Bin”—the Assiniboia Hotel—and other British Army hangouts. Today, city police feel that indigenous groups—such noted pacifists as oilfield workers and cowboys—are more likely to break the peace.

“British soldiers are an easy target because they stand out,” says Inspector Gordon Earl, the Medicine Hat Police Service's liaison with the British Army. “In my experience, British soldiers do not act as instigators as much as some other people. In any event, we have not had any major incidents in recent times, and if there is a problem with a particular soldier, the people on the base are excellent to deal with.”

The spirit of co-operation goes beyond maintaining the law. With 106 Canadian soldiers and 191 civilian employees at Defence Research and Development Canada, plus another 206 British soldiers and 228 full-time civilians at British Army Training Unit Suffield, the base has become one of the region's largest employers. Civvies can tour the 2,690-km^2 range, and local politicians, businesspeople and community groups see their share of military presentations. Captain Sterling Cripps, Suffield's public affairs officer, believes grassroots connections to Suffield have improved image problems. “Just about everybody in Medicine Hat has some connection to the base,” he says, “whether it is a brother, sister, parent, a friend or neighbour working out here, whether they are a soldier, a civil servant or a contractor working out here.” Many soldiers posted to Suffield wind up retiring in Medicine Hat.

Similarly, Richard Grant plans to retire near Morinville. He expects to be sent to National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa first, but that didn't stop the self-described city boy from buying a four-acre lot in Carbondale. The Grants will come back and build a home when Richard finishes his final tour of duty. “This place has become home,” he says, “even for a B.C. guy.” And that's fine with old-timers like Gib Boddez, even if it means no more angle parking on main street.

Will Gibson's work has appeared in *Maclean's* and *Canadian Business*. He spent four years as an army reservist.