

Council pays respects to local Afghanistan veterans

by Julia Le

Special to the Beaver

Afghanistan — was it worth it?

That was the question Afghanistan veteran Lt. Col. Guy Smith asked as he spoke at Oakville Town council Monday night.

He said it depends on one's frame of reference — his reflects one who served in Afghanistan.

Moments before council observed a moment-of-silence ceremony to honour Oakville members of the Canadian Forces who served in Afghanistan, Smith explained what Canadian Forces faced there when they arrived more than a decade ago.

As the fifth poorest country in the world and having been involved in 30 years of conflict, he said, most had seen nothing but war.

"In 2002, 20 per cent of all children died of preventable diseases before age five and epidemics were rampant," he said, adding women's rights were practically non-existent and only one in 20 girls received any kind of education.

Canada was sent to help build a "stable, democratic, self-sufficient society" and provide hope for the future by working with the Afghan National Security Force, training its members and expanding it to create security and support governance, he said.

A strategic advisory team also provided advice to several Afghanistan ministries while a provincial reconstruction team worked to provide vac-



Afghanistan veteran Lt. Col. Guy A. Smith, in front, received the honour bestowed by Oakville Town Council through a moment-of-silence at Monday night's council meeting. Joining Smith on behalf of their returning and fallen comrades, were Gene Reed, president of Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 486 Bronte, left, and Brian L. Ray, Legion president Branch 114 Oakville, right. Canadian Forces withdrew from Afghanistan earlier this year.

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cinations and medical care, as well as schools, roads and dams.

Smith explained how Canada's efforts have helped 4.8 million refugees become repatriated.

"Hundreds of thousands of former combatants were disarmed and demobilized," he continued. "More than 100,000 light weapons were collected, 400,000 land mines cleared and more

than six million children were back in school, of whom, many were girls."

Noting how the country's per-capita income doubled in three years and its security forces had grown tenfold to more than 300,000 members, he said Canada has done its part to help.

"It was not about fighting, seizing and holding ground, it was about winning the hearts and

minds of the Afghan people," he said.

"Our Canadian soldiers and civilians have done us proud," Smith said, noting their courage and dedication will never be forgotten.

On behalf of council, Mayor Rob Burton thanked the local veterans and their families.

"Our mission in Afghanistan was the longest act of military engagement in Canadian history, spanning more than a decade, involving more than 40,000 soldiers and claiming the lives of 162 Canadians," he said. "With war, comes sacrifice."

Ahead of the National Day of Honour on May 9, to pay tribute to those members of the Canadian Forces who served in Afghanistan, Burton said the moment of silence was the Town's way to recognize the families who are the "strength behind the people in Canadian Forces" and those who gave their lives and "returned home safely to our great relief."

In attendance was Philip Kuurstra, who served in 2007, Brian Ray and Gene Reed from Royal Canadian Legion Branches 114 and 486, respectively, and Smith's daughter Stephanie Smith, who served as a critical care nurse in Afghanistan during 2007 and 2008.

Council also took a moment to remember Col. Geoff Parker, an Oakville resident who was killed in Afghanistan on May 18, 2010, when a suicide car bomber struck the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with which Parker was travelling.

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