

October 31

To whom it may concern:

I am submitting a series of stories written by reporter Erin McCracken on a devastating flood that forced scores of people out of their homes this past spring.

The devastation was so widespread the army was called in to assist with local flood mitigation measures.

Erin lived this flood for weeks and gained access to areas no other reporter was allowed because of the trust she has gained in the community in a very short time.

This was the second flood of the century in two years in this community and residents were on edge with strangers. Unbelievably parts of this same community suffered through a powerful tornado one year earlier.

Locals told her their stories and invited her into their homes to show the damage to their properties and the resulting writing I believe is superior to none other.

I hope you agree these three stories put Erin a cut above the rest.

Patrick Uguccione, Editor

Your Community News (West Carleton)



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### Fighting back

Erin McCracken photo

Mark Helpard stands on a 'fortress' of thousands of sandbags that hold back the swollen Ottawa River on the Dunrobin side of Constance Bay. The Armitage Avenue resident is one of 56 flood-impacted residents, the majority of whom went through flooding in 2017. For extensive flood coverage, please turn to pages 18, 19, 22 and 23.



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About 40 military reservists work to shore up a sandbag wall around a home in MacLaren's Landing on May 2. Residents received much-needed help from the Canadian military in several waterfront communities in West Carleton.



Erin McCracken photo

Carleton Place resident David Klerks, front left, his Kanata Nokia colleague Jeff Rodgers, of Stittsville, right, Greely's Marika Routliffe, back left, and Rodgers' daughter, Jada Rodgers, back right, fill sandbags at the Constance & Buckham's Bay Community Centre.

## 'It's a war against Mother Nature'

BY ERIN MCCRACKEN

It's mid-morning but Coun. Eli El-Chantiry has already been up before the crack of dawn and on the road for hours, making his daily rounds when I joined him for the day.

"It's a war. It's a war against Mother Nature," he says during a brief pit stop at his ward office. "Sometimes it feels good that you're winning individual battles or saving extra property or homes. One thing we never talk about is thank God we never lost a life."

It has been a near-constant race against time, but the large-scale humanitarian effort has brought out the best in people.

"The human element is so unbelievable. It touches your heart. It touches your soul," El-Chantiry says, struck by how worried his flood-impacted residents are about him.

One Constance Bay resident has lost two properties to the floods and another to a recent fire.

"You know what she says? 'Thanks to you...,'" El-Chantiry says, pausing to choke back tears. "Thanks

to you, at least I saved two out of the five because of your effort.' What would you say to that?"

His first stop after resuming his rounds is MacLaren's Landing to check in with local resident Shannon Todd, the area's volunteer flood coordinator.

Locals here first grappled with flooding on April 8 as ditches and catch basins were overwhelmed by spring run-off and rain. Their attention soon turned to waterfront houses and cottages in the tight-knit community of 200 homes, nestled between Fitzroy Harbour and Constance Bay, as the Ottawa River spilled its banks.

"Long, sleepless nights. Early mornings," Todd says of her schedule, watching as military reservists work quickly to shore up a sandbag wall around a resident's house, one of 10 impacted by rising waters in the area.

Upwards of 100 volunteers were previously called in to help fill sandbags as area residents became overwhelmed.

"We needed help. We had 60, 70 year olds bagging their own sand and building walls. It's a lot," says Todd, who also coordinated local efforts

during the 2017 floods.

"In 2017 we went through five loads of sand. We are now at 31 loads of sand," she says, weeks after the first load of sand arrived on April 11. "We've done approximately 8,000 bags."

About 40 military reservists from Ottawa and as far away as Oshawa and Peterborough arrived May 2 to provide their expertise.

2nd Lieut. Milan Fortner, with the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, says the troops were pleased to help.

"What feels especially good is to see the progress that we've made over a period of time. A lot of these walls that we started with are nothing and then over the course of a day, we make something that's five-feet high and can withstand a flood and that's very impressive," Fortner says. "It's also impressive to see the outpouring of gratitude from local residents."

Todd was instrumental in securing the military's help.

"This lady, she has been a Godsend to us over the past two weeks now. She is the reason these (soldiers) are here because she reached out to me," El-Chantiry

says before continuing on his rounds, heading next to Constance Bay.

The countryside offers a breathtaking view of fields and woods, lush with the spring rain.

"When people say this is God's country, honestly, you've got to agree with them," says El-Chantiry, who moved to West Carleton in 1988 and for 22 years owned the Lighthouse Restaurant in Constance Bay, a community of 910 dwellings and more than 3,000 people. "I've never felt more at home 'til I moved to West Carleton. This is home."

The Ottawa River is calmer today. There are no waves or wind, a small blessing the councillor is thankful for.

He slowly navigates Bayview Drive, stopping before reaching a barrier.

A section of the water-covered road is closed. Homes here are without power to reduce the risk of electrocution for those working and residing in the flooded neighbourhood.

Delivering the news that power would be cut was difficult for El-Chantiry, reason why he advocated that fewer homes be cut off than

originally planned.

"The difference is 30 to 35 homes," he says. "That's a huge difference. So those people continued to have a chance."

"To me they're families. To me it's not just numbers."

El-Chantiry says he understood why many refused to evacuate and instead chose to stay and maintain a constant vigil over their properties.

"I cannot deny them the opportunity because even if you save an extra house, that means you have saved an extra house," he says. "We lost enough houses."

He slows his vehicle to check in with Paul Graveline, who evacuated from his Bayview Drive home but maintains a near-constant presence.

"We're at about 71 litres (of gas) we're using a day," he says, flanked by his son Rob Graveline and friend Larry Clement. "We're doing as best as we can."

"Did you lose your cottage?" Graveline asks El-Chantiry, referring to the councillor's Bayview Drive rental property currently immersed in floodwater.

"Yes," El-Chantiry says,

before changing the subject, unwilling to shine the spotlight on his own challenges. Previously he said, he wanted to focus his efforts on residents.

"I didn't have one sandbag at my house," he said. "It's not about me."

Instead, he asks the trio of men how they are doing.

"We've been at this for 10 days now. We're on a rotation. Every two hours, day and night we walk down there, we gas the pumps, make sure everything is fine and come back up again," Graveline says, motioning to his RV parked in a nearby driveway where he and his wife and their two cats are staying.

"I'm running a campsite here. I told him no fires after 11," Clement quips.

Graveline is already thinking ahead to next steps.

"We're going to have to lift the house ... and put it on a new foundation," he says. "I'm never going through this again."

His son, Rob, has been on night duty to take off some of the pressure from his dad and the neighbours.

PLEASE SEE FLOOD, PAGE 19

## &gt;&gt; FLOOD, FROM PAGE 18

"It's non-stop," he says. "It's damage control at this point, is all we're doing. I'm just hoping everything holds and the pumps don't break down."

El-Chantiry resumes his patrol, passing another police checkpoint on his way to the Constance & Buckham's Bay Community Centre, where he heads inside to be briefed at the military command post. Outside, volunteers and soldiers work together to fill sandbags.

Melissa Sieniecky sent around an email at Nokia asking for volunteer sandbaggers and 20 people offered their help.

"We were on a bus and we didn't even know where we were going," she says of their final destination.

Nor did it matter. They just wanted to offer their help to those in need.

"Just hearing the stories of how people are working all day and then they don't even think twice and come sandbag until 10 o'clock at night. I can give up some of my day to go and help, especially with our work supporting it," Sieniecky says.

Back inside the community centre, Happy, a therapy dog is making the rounds.

"That's the kind of dog I need to take around with me in the car," El-Chantiry says, before presenting Maj. Cullen Downey, in charge of the military command post, with a red ward sweater, creating some levity in the 24/7 operations centre.

"Thank you so much guys," El-Chantiry says, radios crackling to life around him.

The councillor also checks in with Bayview Drive resident Angela Bernhardt, who volunteers as vice-president of West Carleton Disaster Relief.

Discussions began early this year to prepare for flooding 'what ifs,' and more than 3,000 information flyers were delivered weeks ago to flood-prone communities in Constance Bay, along



Erin McCracken photo

Coun. Eli El-Chantiry, left, speaks with Paul Graveline, in front, and his son Rob Graveline, in back, and Larry Clement, right, while navigating Bayview Drive in Constance Bay. Paul Graveline is one of many Bayview Drive homeowners impacted by record-high flooding.

Armitage Avenue, and in Fitzroy and MacLaren's Landing.

The river began to rise as it does every year, but the situation quickly escalated and the disaster relief volunteers sprang into action.

The military's arrival made all the difference, given their resources, equipment, experience and high-level expertise.

"The military has been a united force for all of us," Bernhardt says. "It was such a relief for us to have them there to be there to support us because we're still tired from the flood of 2017. We're exhausted from the tornado and now we have to do it again."

Though the waters have been receding after peaking at the start of May, residents worry about a second peak arriving, coinciding with the northern snow melt.

"People are very resilient. They call it a fight, without question. But people are tired," says Bernhardt. "The unfortunate reality is that normal is quite a ways away."

Rideau-Goulbourn Coun. Scott Moffatt is here too, wanting to get a handle on operations.

"People are exhausted," he

says, as El-Chantiry drives him back to his car. "One person said it was better than it was two years ago in terms of communications."

But seeing is believing in terms of the scale of the natural disaster.

"It's when you see people's 911 numbers almost under water," Moffatt says before El-Chantiry stops to talk to a truckload of young men.

"Be safe, guys," the councillor calls, before returning Moffatt to his car.

In hops El-Chantiry's wife, Maha. The councillor slowly navigates his vehicle along the closed section of Bayview Drive.

A wall of sandbags stretches along one side of the road, holding back river water and debris, though groundwater has seeped up on the other side.

"If it wasn't for the armed forces doing this, all of these residents, both sides, would have had to leave," El-Chantiry says.

He passes by his own flooded rental property only giving it a glance before stopping to speak to a woman. A nearby generator hums.

Her property was also damaged in the 2017 floods, and her property in Dunrobin

was hit by the tornado.

"This has put us back again," she says.

El-Chantiry offers his help before resuming his tour,

noting a flooded house ravaged by fire.

A man calls out, "Eli, when are they turning the power back on?"

It's a common question from homeowners along Bayview and in other flooded communities in the ward. Without power, they've had to rely on gas generators to pump water from their homes.

El-Chantiry says safety is the priority. "If they turn it on and you're dry and this guy's wet, the electricity will be in the water and we'll all be electrocuted," he says.

"You have to bear with us because we're tired and miserable," a woman adds.

El-Chantiry soon stops to check in at the Lighthouse, immersed in water. He makes note of a request for help transporting spoiled food and garbage from the business.

He stops at another home and expresses concern for the owner.

"You look like you haven't had any sleep yet," El-Chantiry says.

"Well, getting up every hour," the homeowner says. "I'm good now. Thanks for checking."

El-Chantiry drives out of the restricted zone and stops to ask a police officer to get a message to the military that a generator they dropped off at a home is now out of gas.

Though it's late afternoon, and the councillor's mental to-do list is growing, there are many requests to relay to various officials and social media messages to share.

He'll soon head to Dunrobin before returning to the Constance & Buckham's Bay Community Centre for an early evening briefing.

"They have a new road that's been breached so we'll see what we have to do," El-Chantiry says, his mind already on the next task, his day far from over.

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# 'Armitage Army' credited with fighting floodwaters to save homes

BY ERIN MCCrackEN

Mark Helpard steps out onto a wall thick with thousands of sandbags.

"It's like a fortress," he says, and with good reason since it is currently holding back the Ottawa River.

Stepping back onto his front porch, which offers a view of the swollen Constance Bay on the Dunrobin side, a canoe and two kayakers pass by, where normally there would be shoreline.

Helpard looks at his neighbour's home, where a wall of sandbags lies submerged, a signal that a valiant battle was fought and lost.

"We didn't have the manpower to get enough bags in place," he says, recalling the waves that overcame the barrier. "You put one down, three get knocked down."

"It's a catastrophe," he says of the record-level flood, an especially nightmare blow since many homeowners along Armitage Avenue waged a similar fight during the spring flood in 2017, though peak levels were lower than this year. "This is like a second kick in the pants."

His own five-foot-tall sandbag blockade, some of it covered in plastic sheeting, has sprung the odd leak and groundwater has bubbled up on the house side of the barrier. But Helpard has four sump pumps working around the clock. Even still, his basement is damp with groundwater.

But without his homemade wall, some of it constructed with sandbags he kept after the 2017 floods, he says his basement would have been inundated with neck-deep water.

"It could have been a lot worse," says Helpard, who has lived on Armitage Avenue since 1992. "I'm considering myself one of the lucky ones on the street."

In the meantime, he



Ottawa firefighter Paul Asmis says flood-relief efforts along Armitage Avenue in West Carleton-March Ward were the product of neighbours helping neighbours, who are now known as the 'Armitage Army.' Asmis also lives along the avenue, but his home was not flooded.

continues to monitor for leaks.

"I think we've beaten it, knock on wood," he says. "I wouldn't jinx it. I'm not going to remove one sandbag. No way."

Still, he's thinking of adjustments he can make to his property, such as raising his well four feet ahead of the melt next year to prevent contamination. Helpard has already raised his furnace a few inches. His hot-water tank now sits about chest high in his basement.

Two years ago, 13 homes along the avenue were flooded. This year, just over a half-dozen were overcome, some of them cottages, others primary residences.

"Almost that's a win," West



ABOVE LEFT: An Armitage Avenue resident waves from his sandbag-barricaded home. ABOVE RIGHT: Water covers a driveway leading to an Armitage Avenue residence. BOTTOM: A kayaker navigates not far from where the shoreline should be in front of flooded homes and cottages on the Dunrobin side of Constance Bay.

Carleton-March Coun. Eli El-Chantiry says on a recent media tour of the community.

He credits advance preparations, proper sandbagging, and support from multiple agencies as well as the military.

"We weren't alone in this fight and if we save one home I think it's a win," El-Chantiry says.

Of the 154 homes and seasonal cottages along this strip, 56 have been impacted by floodwaters.

Boats, canoes and kayaks are stationed at some of the residences surrounded by water.

A city truck bearing journalists pass by a flooded home.

"We fought like heck to

save it but the water overran its defences," says Paul Asmis, an Ottawa firefighter who lives on Armitage, but whose home was not affected by flooding.

He notes three homes in a row where protective sandbag walls remain intact.

"A lot of this work is neighbour on neighbour. Really, neighbours helping neighbours is one of the key things. We call this the Armitage Army now," says Asmis, adding the group hasn't lost a home to flooding in a week.

"In the early days of the fight it was all Armitage neighbours fighting to protect each others' homes," he says. "That was a remarkable effort and it was absolutely awe-inspiring to see so many

people coming out to help one another."

Residents also volunteered their time to stake the area with red and white flags that mark how high the water was projected to rise.

Though the first peak did not reach those levels, the surveying allowed homeowners to better prepare their properties.

"We could target where we put our efforts. That was another key lesson learned," Asmis says, referring to the 2017 flooding.

He notes another home where new owners moved in recently, the same week the flood levels first peaked.

"They're fighting and holding," he says.

Some residents moved

away from the area after the 2017 floods, though the majority chose to stay. Many will remain after this record flood.

"It's an amazing community to live in, the fact that everyone pitches in to help each other so easily is inspiring," Asmis says. "It really is a sense of belonging here. Everyone helps everyone. It's small, we're rural."

Helpard says that is one of the hallmarks of his neighbourhood.

"When disaster happens the community is together," he says. "When something like this happens it doesn't matter. It's all about helping each other and getting this problem solved."

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Erin McCracken photos

# 'It's very rewarding': Behind the scenes at Constance Bay's military command post

BY ERIN MCCRACKEN

The order came down through the military's chain of command. Four hours later about 150 soldiers from CFB Petawawa were Ottawa-bound, just the third time in a decade the base has been activated to respond to a domestic natural disaster.

They moved out in light-armoured vehicles and transport trucks, headed for Connaught Ranges at Shirley's Bay, the result of a state of emergency declared by Mayor Jim Watson on April 25, and the city's request that the provincial government assist in managing the emergency operation and call in the Canadian Armed Forces.

An estimated 320 regular force and reservist military personnel were deployed, fanning out across Ottawa's flooded communities.

The next morning on April 26 at 8 a.m. the 3rd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, supported by other military trades, arrived at the Constance & Buckham's Bay Community Centre.

"Over the first few days it was identifying breaches in the walls from waves and damage and going to repair those," said Capt. Gerry Cacella, second-in-command of the 24/7 military command post inside the centre, where he was stationed from 7 a.m., before the volunteers and civilian agency reps arrived, until 8 p.m., after those same reps left for the day.

"Anywhere the conditions are hazardous we can send our teams or civilians to go have a look."

Of primary concern was the need to protect Bayview Drive in Constance Bay before water levels rose to projected peak levels. Soldiers spent much of their time reinforcing a sandbag wall along that route with tens of thousands of sandbags.

"Which was a success,"



Erin McCracken photo

A military command post set up inside the Constance & Buckham's Bay Community Centre during flood-relief efforts was an around-the-clock operation.

Cacella said. "I can say half of our time here focused on building up that wall and making sure that route was passable so people could fight the flood in their homes and not be forcibly evacuated. And that was our success. "That would have probably triggered a forced evacuation but we avoided that by maintaining the road," he said.

A map of the waterfront region is stretched along one wall. Radios and computers dominate a central table. The officers check in with one another, before West Carleton-March Coun. Eli El-Chantiry arrives to provide his own briefing, relaying messages on behalf of city officials and flood-affected residents in his ward.

One of the first tasks the military commanders did was connect with reps from all of the agencies, including volunteer organizations, working on the ground to help West Carleton's riverfront communities in the race against rising floodwaters.

"At the peak flood, we were maintaining a presence here 24/7 overnight just to assist with any evacuations as needed," Cacella said on

May 3, a day after the tail end of the first floodwater peak.

Residents and volunteers, including the West Carleton Disaster Relief volunteers, were critical links.

"And since they dealt with the 2017 floods, they had a lot of historical data they could draw on and actually help us predict trends that gave us an edge in getting ahead of the situation," said

Cacella.

Local contacts made the difference.

"Definitely it took the first couple days in Constance Bay to get to really know the area, driving around, interacting with local citizens," he said.

"They were instrumental in painting the picture for us when we first arrived. And we've just built on it from

there."

Information was also shared with other military counterparts, including reservists from numerous units who were assigned to help with local efforts.

"Between all of us we cover gaps in our capabilities and make sure that we all have the best understanding of the ground at all times," Cacella said.

Meetings were convened three times daily, at 8:30 a.m., 1 p.m. and 6 p.m., at which updates are shared by city staff, West Carleton Disaster Relief, public health officials, police, fire and paramedic services, the Salvation Army and the Red Cross, among others.

It ensured the right supplies were getting to where they were most needed, that local residents in flooded communities were being supported and that roads remained accessible, even if just by military or heavy equipment vehicles.

Data was drawn from government resources to predict rising water levels and help map out next steps.

"It's very rewarding to be helping in fighting flooding for your own citizens, and they've been nothing but kind to us, giving us food and just keeping a good working atmosphere in here with the inter-agency cooperation," Cacella said of his first domestic operation with the forces.

"It's been a good experience."


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