

Combat engineers rebuild bridge

Article by Sgt Allan Wallace, Army News, Toronto
Photos by MCpl Dan Pop, Army News, Toronto

Duncan, Ontario — The 900-km Bruce Trail winds from Niagara to Tobermory. Used by thousands of hikers each year, it is not easy to maintain.

Unsurprisingly, the 25-year-old footbridge across Mill Creek in the Beaver Valley was in a serious state of disrepair, posing safety concerns for hikers. Consequently, the Beaver Valley Bruce Trail Club approached 32 Combat Engineer Regiment (32 CER) to help refurbish the bridge earlier this fall.



Sgt Andy Thomas puts the finishing touches on the handrail of the Mill Creek Bridge

A challenging project

“The unit gets a lot of training value out of these particular projects,” said bridge commander Sergeant Kent Burtenshaw. “Even though this is for a civilian organization, the unit is getting a lot out of it. Among the challenges associated with the construction, this is the worst project I have ever seen, as far as accessibility goes.”

The Bruce Trail is strictly a footpath; the use of any vehicles—even bicycles—is strictly prohibited. According to the conservancy brochure, it was “created and maintained to produce the least possible ecological footprint.” Thus, the sappers had to complete their work with only their boots on the trail to preserve the natural ecosystems at the bridge site.

“The first thing that impressed me was the environmental considerations that were in place,” said Peter Ryan, volunteer and ‘Trail Captain’ with the Bruce Trail Conservancy Group. “Barriers being put up and so on ... They completed the work totally in keeping with the Bruce Trail – a peaceful and pleasant place to hike in. I am delighted.”

Another challenge was the worksite itself. Not only was it located in a riverbed at the bottom of a very steep ridge, but Mother Nature also added some wet weather into the muddy mix. Undaunted, the soldiers ably negotiated the treacherous gradient to the site and began their work under project manager Captain Brian Lee.



Cpl Hai Dai secures the bottom bracing during the refurbishment of the Mill Creek Bridge on the Trans Canada Trail near Ravenna, Ontario.

Challenges overcome

A nine-member advance party completed demolition of the old bridge in less than a day. The old pieces were hauled out and new materials were brought in via aerial ropeway. Eight additional soldiers came out to build the new bridge, working diligently through the weekend to complete the project on schedule.

Military engineers have participated in every significant Canadian Forces campaign, and they continually provide community service on home soil, as they did on the Bruce Trail in the Ontario wilderness. Their branch motto, derived from their long list of battle honours, is Ubique. It means “everywhere.”