

Exercise NIHILO SAPPER abandons ‘the same old thing’ and builds not only a bridge but community spirit

St. John, New Brunswick — It was November again, and for the soldiers of 4 Engineer Support Regiment (4 ESR) from Gagetown, New Brunswick (NB), that meant spending another month in the sunny confines of the Base Gagetown Range and Training Area for Exercise NIHILO SAPPER; however, this year the exercise was different, even “epic.”

The Latin phrase “Ex Nihilo” means to make something out of nothing – and this is truly apt for this exercise because “nothing” in terms of infrastructure is what soldiers usually find when they deploy to a new operation. “Sapper” is a term for young military engineers dating back to the 19th century when French military miners would “sap” or undermine enemy defenses.



A bridge was built in Rockwood Park for the local community by 4 ESR during Exercise Nihilo Sapper in Nov 15. Photo by: WO Jerry Kean, 5 Cdn Div

Every year, the Regiment deploys to the Training Area to simulate setting up the theatre of operations, as well as to conduct general and close support engineering tasks. Every year Engineer Officer Candidates from the Canadian Forces School of Military Engineering (CFSME) get a chance to lead our unit’s soldiers. Every year it is cold, and every year it is a challenge. But not this year. Instead of deploying to the Training Area, 4 ESR picked up all their gear and deployed to the port of Saint John. We invited other units from across Canada, including reserve and regular force units from Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. They doubled our personnel strength, and we spread out our forces across southern NB from Sussex to Saint John and to Gagetown.

Instead of doing the same thing as last year, we started from scratch to get outside our comfort zone of the Training Area and into the real world, interacting with real civilians in a real

“foreign” environment. Instead of just building a bridge only to tear it down again, we built a bridge for use in the local park. We helped build a home for a non-governmental organisation, we engaged the media, and we built relationships with the community and the other units that helped support our exercise.

Instead of just building a bridge only to tear it down again, we built a bridge for use in the local park. We helped build a home for a non-governmental organisation, we engaged the media, and we built relationships with the community and the other units that helped support our exercise.

If you had talked to any of the troops who stayed in Saint John, you would have heard how the change of location made a huge

difference to them, how hearing the ships blast their horns in the morning, and seeing the lights from the shipping cranes made them feel like they were on deployment outside Canada, not just down the road in Gagetown.

Hearing the ships blast their horns in the morning, and seeing the lights from the shipping cranes made them feel like they were on deployment outside Canada, not just down the road in Gagetown.

However, not everyone was in Saint John as another change this year was to focus on dispersed operations. In this context, 43 Counter IED Squadron, a sub-unit of 4 ESR, and 51 Squadron from 5e Regiment de genie du combat based in Valcartier, Quebec operated mainly within the training area, along with the candidates from the Canadian Forces School of Military Engineering.

Other 4 ESR sub-units were also heavily involved. 45 Vertical Construction Squadron, which is the infrastructure and construction sub-unit, was busy building a 500 person camp in Saint John, as well as 100 person camps in the training area and in Sussex. Members of 42 Horizontal Construction Squadron, which is the heavy equipment, bridging and engineer resource sub-unit, conducted rafting operations from the local yacht club across the Saint John and Kennebecasis Rivers, built an 18 metre-long non-standard bridge designed by Kingston, Ontario-based 1 Engineer Support Unit, and provided engineer resource support to all the other squadrons.

With all of these operations, 48 Combat Service Support Squadron, which is the logistic and maintenance sub-unit of 4 ESR, responded to over 100 repair and recovery requests, working tirelessly to maintain vehicles, support requests, and feed our troops across southern NB.



Members of 4ESR Construction Troop lend a hand working on a new Habitat for Humanity home in Saint John during Exercise Nihilo Sapper 2015. Photo by: WO Jerry Kean, 5 Cdn Div

The bar has certainly been raised after this year's NIHILO SAPPER. The change in location has led to more opportunities to support the community, therefore broadening the scope of tasks and leading to more diverse training opportunities for our unit, as well as for the Officer Candidates of the CFSME.

Bringing the exercise to a new environment certainly had its tests and challenges, both on the ground and in the planning process. Given all the new things that we were exposed to, it was refreshing to apply our familiar skills in an unfamiliar setting, to positively affect real civilians, and to be part of such an "epic" exercise in an area so close to our homes, to our families, and to our hearts.

By Lieutenant Ryan Perry, 4 Engineer Support Regiment



48 Combat Service Support Squadron responded to over 100 repair and recovery requests, working tirelessly to maintain vehicles, support requests, and feed troops across Southern NB during Exercise Nihilo Sapper 2015. Photo by: Capt Neil Sinclair, 4 ESR