

Is the Nanaimo Rifle Range Safe?

As part of the construction of Nanaimo Army Camp, NRR was started in July 1940 and opened about a year later. It is variously described as encompassing 800, 840, 860 or 880 acres. The actual firing points are between 600 yards (maximum) near the main entrance at the end of Lincoln Road, and 100 yards (minimum) closest to the mechanical targets, of which there are 20. Sand berms (butts) behind the targets are intended to capture most of the bullets, but depending on the angle of fire bullets may go much further. There is a separate 25 yard pistol range to the north east. For decades there was a caretaker's residence near the main gate. The range was designed to include a mortar bomb practice range and there is strong evidence that thousands of mortar shells were fired nearby both during the war and maybe for a couple of decades after. It seems that the exact location of the mortar range is now unknown but the formerly cleared area would now have trees up to 80 years old. About one percent of the shells failed to explode and attempts were made to locate them for disposal after practices. High explosive mortar shells (2.25 and 10 pound), as well as smoke and illuminating rounds were fired. Although small they are still lethal decades later. They tended to bury themselves two to three feet in the ground, then take decades to slowly rise to the surface. In 1962 a twenty-eight year old man died after picking up an explosive on the Nanaimo range. It is unknown if any effort to clear was ever performed after they stopped using mortars. Vernon's army camp and 600 yard rifle range has been exclusively used by cadets for many years. There have been many fatalities on the ranges due to unexploded mortars: 1944 one young man; 1945 one young man; 1948 three men; 1963 two boy scouts; 1973 two children (plus two injured). A total of nine dead

and three injured. Across Canada since WWII there were 15 deaths and 20 maimed. Some cleanup efforts were made in 1946, 1953, 1957 and 1963 (turned up 83 bombs and another 80 later on) at Vernon. Following the last fatalities, Operation Clean Sweep using 150 men (21,000 man-hours) turned up 300 mortars, shells, bombs and grenades). 32 airborne engineer troops cleared Tree Island (off Denman Island). At the former army camp in Courtney the engineer squadron from Chilliwack found 21 clusters of bombs. You get the idea - they ran out of trained personnel to use. Mortar bombs represent one potential danger at the rifle range. The other is the safety area, north of the Butts. By transposing data from the 1:50,000 topographic maps, or less accurately the 2008 map of the Nanaimo range issued by DND, show a distance of about two miles from the main gate to the end of DND property, which translates into about 3500 yards. When the Nanaimo range was designed, .303" (7.70 mm) cartridges were fired from SMLE rifles and machine guns with a maximum range of 3000 yards. In 1958 the 7.62 mm .308") cartridge came into service in self loading rifles and C6 machine guns with a maximum range of 3828 yards. Since 7.62 is still authorized for NRR, either the range is longer that I imagine or the stated range is awry. Finally, in 1984 the 5.56 mm .223" cartridge was introduced in assault rifles, carbines and light machine guns. It's maximum range is much less than its predecessors which explains why the C6 medium machine gun remains in service. Both the USA and Canada are working on a new weapon with a cartridge between 7.62 and 5.56 – 6.80 mm, with longer range, accuracy and lethality than currently issued, for delivery by about 2022.

The gist of my comments are that contrary to what the petitioners have been told in the press or elsewhere, all of the range is required to be safe from stray bullets. There is evidence of explosive munitions and grenades in NRR. It remains to be seen how much. In 1983 the main gate had a sign saying "Nanaimo Rifle Range, Military Target Area, Do Not Touch Anything, It May Explode And Kill You". I suggest that the Military Police and RCMP are going to be busy if civil disobedience continues – arresting and ticketing trespassers with fines of \$1000 and/or imprisonment for twelve months for trespass and damage to signs and fences. Perhaps Mischief or Criminal Negligence charges are appropriate. I'm sure the military have no wish to be at odds with the populace. The City of Nanaimo, being a neighbor of DND at Westwood Lake might like to support them rather than confronting them and embarrassing us by requesting recreational usage of federal land. It may be that using primarily 5.56 mm ammunition for more than three decades has made the use of RRN safety area a bit less dangerous for bikers. Nonetheless, the C6 medium machine gun is still in use. Are you feeling lucky today? Who will be responsible if somebody is injured or killed on the range? There are almost six thousand regular military personnel on Vancouver Island. Use of weapons is a basic tenet of their job. They need to continue using the range, as do the militia on the island and the lower mainland. As CFB Esquimalt have stated, it's all about safety – they are not simply being mean. Those trees in the range are still there because the range existed for eighty years. The best thing to do is leave the safety area alone and stay away from any part of the range. All information has been collected from the BC Newspaper Indexes and through Google on-line. *DND MIGHT WANT TO*

INITIATE AN EDUCATIONAL COMPONENT. ABOUT RANGE DANGERS.