



Structure, tradition, responsibility – The Our Kids Review of:

Robert Land Academy

- 3. Basics
- 5. Background
- 15. Student population
- 17. Academics
- 19. Extracurricular activities
- 22. Pastoral care, well-being, and discipline
- 26. Getting in
- 27. Money matters
- 28. Parents/Alumni
- 29. The Takeaway



Some students thrive in environments where they have lots of latitude to be independent and self-motivating. Others thrive in the opposite: an environment that is structured and ordered, with very clear limits and recognizable boundaries. Robert Land, truly, is for them. The daily routine is regimented, and discipline is enforced. And the results are consistently astonishing. This is a school that prides itself on its ability to turn lives around, and that pride is well placed. Robert Land isn't for every student, but, of course, no school is. For students who require structure in order to succeed, Robert Land Academy can make a remarkable difference in a very short period of time.

Location: West Lincoln, Ontario

Motto: Deus et Patria (God and Country)

Founded: 1978

Enrolment: 125

Grades: 5 to 12

Gender: Boys

Living Arrangements: Boarding

Language of instruction: English

Faith-based: Not faith-based

School focus: Military

Developmental priorities: Balanced, intellectual

Oversight: Board of governors

Campus area: 168 acres

1. Basics

In the common imagination, military academies are punitive, task-oriented, associated with a larger governing body—such as a national military—and created to serve a strategic purpose. Robert Land Academy, however, isn't any of that, a point that can't be emphasized enough. The school was created as a place of support, namely to provide an environment and lifestyle that would help a specific type of student gain admission to university and be successful once there. Despite the Hollywood depictions of military school, there isn't any yelling from cruel drill sergeants, nor is there an emphasis on group goals over the goals of individuals. There's also no munitions training, only a very few of the faculty are ex-military, and students don't enroll in order to jumpstart a career in the military. In every way, Robert Land is an institution unto itself, serving its own goals.

All students board, primarily because most arrive with the kinds of challenges that can't be effectively addressed in just six hours of school each day. For a majority of them, Robert Land marks a dedication to a new beginning; the acceptance of a second chance. Goals are clear and, while the challenges are considerable, they are age-appropriate and attainable through consistent application and effort. The school is rightly proud of its ability, shown over the four decades of its life, to transform students' lives and the lives of their families.

Many people don't have a positive impression of military school in general, and perhaps there are many reasons for that, prime among them an unfamiliarity with what military schools do. We asked parent Julie Hunt about what she might say if someone were to comment 'I could never send my son to a military school.' Without a blink she said, "First I'd say it's not about you, it's about the child. And I think sometimes people forget that." Of the program, she adds "It's not harsh. It's just about being responsible and understanding that your actions have consequences. And David's learned that."

Still, she doesn't gild any lilies. David is energetic, and that combined with social problems was fast creating a perfect storm. Despite his obvious intellect, there was a growing awareness that post-secondary education was not likely going to be in the cards, at least not given the path that he was increasingly heading down. "It wasn't something I took lightly," she says of delivering David to Robert Land on intake day. "I'll be honest with you, I cried all the way home. It was very tough. ... It's not a typical school." The results, she's equally quick to note, have been clear. Despite being away, "he appreciates his time at home. Where before I think he took that for granted. ... he needed reminders of what your family ultimately means and what your future can be. ... I see what he's done and what he's accomplished, the camaraderie. I don't regret sending him. Not for a minute." After a pause she adds, "And I don't care what people think."

Hunt is very right when she says that Robert Land isn't typical. For one, it's the only school of its kind in the country. It doesn't look like any other school, and the program is also one of a kind, at least in Canada. That said, the results of the school are impressive in every way, and not at all limited to grades or academic achievement. "I can safely say that RLA saved my life," says a recent graduate. "Prior ... I was on the fast track to nowhere. ... It helped make me who I am today."

It takes time to gain that kind of insight. Students don't perceive the benefits of attending immediately, and that's understandable. Augustine Ferri graduated from the school in 2017, having arrived in Grade 8. He says, "You don't always like it here. It's hard. It forces you to confront yourself. But it's important to have that discipline and structure. It's changed my life. It's been a critical part of my formation. I wouldn't change it." That's what Robert Land does. It approaches students honestly, with clear respect and firm guidance, and in so doing it has demonstrated a capacity to change their lives for the better.

2. Background

Robert Land Academy was founded in 1978 by Scott Bowman, who remained headmaster until 2015. He speaks in a clipped, confident, authoritative way. He’s somewhat sharp, forthright, though with clear twinges of emotion when he speaks of the work of the school. “Let me start by thanking you for your leap of faith in sending and supporting your sons at Robert Land,” said Bowman, with a catch in his voice, during his address at the 2017 convocation parade. “Only those who send their sons to boarding school, in these days, know how difficult it may be. ... For the parents of graduates, this parade today is as much to honour you and your achievements as parents as it is your sons.”

While he no longer has a titled role within the school, Bowman is nevertheless involved and visible, something that is symbolic of the consistent leadership that the school has enjoyed. The current headmaster, Kevin Wendling, is only the second headmaster in the school’s history. It has grown and developed over the decades, though the foundational values have been consistently applied.



The school is named after one of Bowman’s ancestors, a United Empire Loyalist who arrived in Upper Canada in the wake of the American Revolutionary war. Land represents, both personally and historically, the values that Bowman sought to express: he was a man driven by his convictions and also very much a product of the era in which he lived.

The school’s culture is overtly aligned with the history of the region and, by extension, the nation, as is apparent throughout the campus. The barracks are named for Isaac Brock, John Butler, and Joseph Brant, leaders who served with British forces in the Niagara region in the period between the American Revolution and the War of 1812. The architecture—particularly that of Loyalist Hall, one of the newest structures on site—references the forts established in the 19th century that dot the Niagara peninsula. That history is also made apparent in the dining hall, where Land’s son’s dress coat is on display in a glass case along with his pistols and some musket balls. The cannon that stands outside Ritchie Hall, the main administration building, is a replica, and it is used as a key element of the Fall Exercise, one of the more important events in the school’s annual calendar. The construction of the dining hall, Landholme Hall, is a feint toward the religious heritage of the period—it looks like a chapel, complete with a cross atop a steeple above the main door—though it doesn’t serve as a chapel and, in fact, never has. The interior of the building reflects its purpose—dining and assemblies—even if the façade doesn’t. In practice, the school is entirely non-denominational.

All of those elements add depth to the life of the school, and they contribute to the sense of place and participation within a tradition that extends beyond its walls. That said, the lived experience of the school is entirely modern, and doesn’t intend to reenact any historical period. The daily uniforms are a hint to that, and are made of multi-scale, digital camouflage, a pattern developed in Canada known as CADPAT, and adopted for use by the Canadian forces in 2002. Another is the use of the property by the local police force for training activity, including work with the K-9 units. Those touches, and indeed many others, help create a modern, consistent, and distinctly Canadian foundation to life on campus. The feel is that of a regional training facility which, in some ways, it authentically is.

Location

The school remains on the property where it was founded, a sprawling 67 hectares (168 acres) on the Niagara Peninsula in the township of West Lincoln. The setting is rural, bucolic, and intentionally at a remove from the bustle and distractions of urban life. The property is bordered by farmers' fields and forest. There are no fences or barriers, and the forest as well as a pond are used in curricular and extracurricular programs. On campus students regularly see deer, and fishing is a common activity.

Instructors rightly make the most of the proximity to green space. The physical plan of the campus proper is organized around Eadie Square, a parade ground that provides a focal point. There and elsewhere the design of the property is utilitarian and unadorned.

While it is within an hour's drive of some major centres—including Hamilton, Toronto, and Buffalo, New York—the campus is within walking distance of none. The drive to the school is through active farming communities dotted with wind turbines. The routes get smaller, turning ultimately onto a gravel road that provides the campus with its most immediate access. (A parent commented to us, “You drive up and are thinking, ‘Where are we?!’” It's a hike, to be sure.) The property was chosen in part because of that, as a place to truly focus attention and set apart from distractions. Where other schools direct student's gaze outward, the focus at Robert Land is inward, and placed unequivocally on academic and personal development.

Bowman and the other founders didn't create the academy in order to celebrate a military ideal, but rather to very intentionally support a unique set of learners: struggling yet talented students.

School life

The atmosphere of RLA—the uniforms, ranks, drills—can initially seem a bit artificial and, if we’re being entirely frank, in some ways it is. The school relates itself to a long military tradition, though it was created independently of that tradition. Were he to return to life and tour the school, Robert Land likely wouldn’t understand quite what is going on and wonder why his name is associated with it.

That said, there’s a very clear method at play, one that underwrites all aspects of school life. Bowman and the other founders didn’t create the academy in order to celebrate a military ideal, but rather to very intentionally support a unique set of learners: struggling yet talented boys. The goal was to address not only academic success and university placement, but also social, behavioural, and ethical development by giving students the tools and supports they need the most. Children, just like adults, desire a sense of belonging: to feel empowered and able; to have a voice within their community of peers and beyond; to be respected for who they are; and to be taken seriously. They want their successes and talents to be recognized, just as they want—and this is perhaps especially true of young people who are acting out—to be caught when they misbehave. It’s an old saw, perhaps, though that doesn’t make it less true: children need limits, and to know the geography of their physical, emotional, and social worlds. They take comfort in knowing that the limits are static, and can be relied upon. They also need emotional appreciation, and while it is less obvious on first glance, they find that here, too.

The Robert Land environment was designed—from the structures to the practices to everything in between—to provide all of those core needs. The insignia, the buildings, the rituals, the uniforms, and so on, are invoked to create a setting that consistently provides and regularly asserts those foundational needs throughout the duration of a student’s experience with the school. “The structure we have in place is positive reinforcement,” says Dr. David Harley, the deputy headmaster. Students, he says, know that when they earn a rank or a trophy, it’s been truly earned. Their success at the school often begins precisely at that

point, when they gain their first rank, that of cadet, within a few weeks of arriving. When they do, they are read out at meal and given a standing ovation. That moment is as transformative as any they will experience at the school. “For many,” says Harley, “this is very meaningful because it may be the first time they have gained public acknowledgment in a positive way.”

That said, for the uninitiated, the life of the campus can be striking. “The boys can get into trouble easily if they’re not under supervision and if they’re not kept busy,” says Harley. And they are. The daily routine is regimented, with discipline regularly and consistently enforced. Male faculty are addressed as sir. (“I sometimes call my mom sir,” says student David Hunt. “It grows in your mind.”) The students all salute the flag every time they pass it, and they salute the Queen every time they enter the dining hall. In the residences, the beds are impeccably made, with rulers available to measure the folds. Inspections are completed daily. Drill, also daily, takes an hour. Students march in formation between classes.

It’s different. Arriving on campus for the first time, students quickly understand that this is something new, and will require something more of them. “It’s an adjustment for them,” says Harley. “It’s like any first day in a new environment. It’s a shock.”

“My first concern was whether he would fit in and be okay,” says a mother of a recent student. “[I was] very, very nervous about whether this was the right spot for my son to be. And whether the staff would be too hard, whether they would understand him. All those things that a mother worries about every day.” There is always going to be that, especially given the journey that many families have made prior to enrolling here. “If I had known then what I know now,” she continues, “I probably would have signed him up earlier. They know what to do to make [boys] succeed.”

“...It’s hard. It forces you to confront yourself, and maybe do some things you don’t want to do. But it’s important to have that discipline and structure. ... It’s changed my life. It’s been a critical part of my formation. I wouldn’t change it.”

It's all very impressive and, as in the case of that parent, often despite some initial concerns. That's especially true in the overt and very sincere expression of care and appreciation from both faculty and students, which is perhaps most apparent during the convocation parade at the end of each school year. Some students may grumble, though during the convocation event, you'd be very hard pressed to point them out. Every faculty member authentically speaks of care, made tangible by the students who approach them for pictures. They clearly love what they do, and students, by and large, do as well, something that is particularly remarkable given the makeup of the student population and all the forces that brought the boys to the school. Yes, some students arrive with some reluctance, though the graduation ceremony, in a range of ways, bears out the idea that, by and large, they grow to appreciate what the experience has brought them



The boarding experience

From the first moment, a student’s experience of the school is one of transition. It’s not always comfortable. When they arrive in September they are given a pair of coveralls to change into. Their hair is cut. They are issued with a space in the barracks and a uniform. Electronic devices are taken and placed in the safe. It’s not an easy day. For some, it’s the low point of the entire experience. “What it focuses on is stripping you of everything you had, and the materialistic sense of your identity,” says Harley, “and then building you up by what you accomplish. It’s not based on what you have, it’s based on what you do. So it sparks your drive to be a better person.”

All students live in barracks that are supervised 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Living spaces are truly Spartan, with each student assigned a cot and a locker. Beds are impeccably made, with the sheets measured—30 centimeters showing both above and below the fold—at inspection each day. The only things on the walls are in the common area, where a world map shows where the students are from—in the 2 platoon barracks there are markers for Nigeria, Jamaica, Thailand, and France, among others—and a pin board shows coming events. All other walls, floors, and ceilings are bare.

“I’ve been here a while,” says student Augustine Ferri (’17). “This is my fifth and final year. It’s been difficult. ... you don’t always like it here. It’s hard. It forces you to confront yourself, and maybe do some things you don’t want to do. But it’s important to have that discipline and structure.”

During a tour of the barracks, Ferri has one of the staff open a locker (there are no private spaces, or even any closed spaces; student lockers are the closest each student has to a space of their own, though they are opened by staff for inspection every day). “That boy is in Grade 9,” the house supervisor says as he steps back, pocketing his keys, “and has a 92 average.” The interior of the locker is, by any usual measure, stunning. Everything, including underwear, is folded, squared, and placed according to instructions listed on a sheet taped to the inside of the door. It’s impeccable.

Nevertheless, Ferri comments that “it’s not an inspection ready locker.” Meaning that, were it to be inspected as is, it wouldn’t pass. “The foiling is off. There should be a three-finger spacing between each item of clothing, and then all of the sleeves get folded down the side. There are a lot of very small details. All the kit has to be labeled. Shirts measured.” Doesn’t it drive you nuts? “Almost,” he answers, chuckling. “You get used to it.”

Also on the inside of the locker door is a goal sheet listing the student’s short-term, long-term, and company goals. A separate sheet lists those goals that have been achieved. “He’s completed the Fall Ex twice,” says Ferri. “The Fall Ex is a 90 kilometre march. He’s a house IC, which means he’s in charge of a section of five or six cadets. He got student of the week, athlete of the week, and citizen of the week. So he’s gotten those recently. They can include their rank on there. It’s just a good reminder.”

It’s not for the faint of heart, especially given that some of the students are as young as 11 or 12. It appears impersonal, though Harley believes that’s deceiving. “If you look at the boys that are here, they’re all very strong little characters. There’s absolutely no conformity of their personalities. They are all very much individuals.” He believes that, “the structure here doesn’t impede individualism. In fact, if anything, I think it promotes it.” That’s an idea that can be difficult to reconcile with the overall gestalt. Marching to class in formation, for one, doesn’t strike as individualistic.

If you look at the boys that are here, ... There’s absolutely no conformity of their personalities. They are all very much individuals.

But, of course, appearances can be deceiving. “Our identity is composed of narratives we construct based on our personal history,” wrote Suzanne Corkin, who was a professor of neuroscience and cognitive psychology at MIT. Many of the students arrived having been caught within a specific narrative, be it one of misbehavior or, in the case of those on the autism spectrum, as outsiders. As structured as it is, the environment at Robert Land allows these boys to reset those narratives, and with them their sense of themselves. While they may be wearing uniforms and polishing boots, for the first time in their lives they are afforded an opportunity to perceive the strength of their own voice, and to have a chance to be heard. They don’t have to play the part they’ve been assigned, to mirror whatever it is that they feel others expect of them, but to build a new one based on their personal strengths. They are able to grow into positions of responsibility, and to express thoughts and ideas that are genuine, and genuinely their own. Ultimately, no one is wearing a costume if everyone is wearing the same costume. And that’s the feeling here, with the structure allowing a unique latitude within personal development.

“Being responsible permeates the life of our students,” says headmaster Kevin Wendling. Leadership roles are varied and so numerous that it’s hard to believe that every student doesn’t have one or more. And, perhaps they do. “IC” stands for “in charge” and is used to designate student roles. “He called and said that he got a job today,” says parent Doug Deschner, “and we said ‘what is it? And he said, ‘I’m the butter IC!’” Deschner chuckles, though is quick to note that cute as the task might seem—the job entailed making sure that butter was distributed in the dining hall during meals—his son was genuinely proud to have earned the role. Some time later he was promoted to iron IC—keeping track of the irons within his barracks. “Which is important because for inspection they need to be looking pretty sharp.” Again, it might seem cute on the face of it, but these roles are age-appropriate, earned, and students are proud to have them.

“There are all kinds of different stories here, of boys who have come here for different reasons.”

“They have opportunities to take on even more responsibilities by taking the roles of leadership,” says Wendling, “which may include a house IC, platoon laundry, phone IC, which in turn can lead to other roles, such as parade sergeant major, and head boy.” Those roles confer a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others and a respect for oneself.

Everything is earned, including calls home. “You don’t even get phone calls until you become a cadet,” says Julie Hunt. “He’s earned a lot of privileges ... He’s coming home this weekend,” she adds during a conversation in mid-September. “And normally you don’t in the first six weeks.”

Many students go home once a month for four days. International students and others who live further afield are able stay on campus during the monthly stand-downs. They are hosted in Fitzgibbon Hall, moving out of barracks for the duration of the break. Social and leisure activities are planned, and meals are also hosted at Fitzgibbon. The intention is to bring those students together, given that there are relatively few of them, and to offer them something special: a stand-down in its truest sense, a break from the routines of the school. It isn’t the same as going home, but it’s a welcome break from the formality of school life.



3. Student population

The annual enrollment, around 125 students, is relatively small when compared to the mean at Canadian schools, which is in the 300 range. There are benefits of a smaller size, including less distraction, a very personal and close-knit environment, and a high teacher-student interface. While there isn't the same range of curricular and extracurricular programming as at larger schools, Robert Land benefits from having a focused academic program with a high level of student-faculty-peer engagement.

A majority of the students arrive at Robert Land from Canada. A remaining twenty percent arrive from the United States, Germany, Mexico, China, and beyond. There are no day students, and all board in barracks halls on site. The school is one of the only remaining in Canada to admit boarders as early as grade 5. Students are divided by age into three main groups: Junior (grades 5, 6, 7, 8), Intermediate (grades 9, 10), and Senior (grades 11, 12), with some physical division between them. While all students are together for meals, the groups maintain separate dormitories, with junior boys also occupying dedicated classrooms and learning spaces.

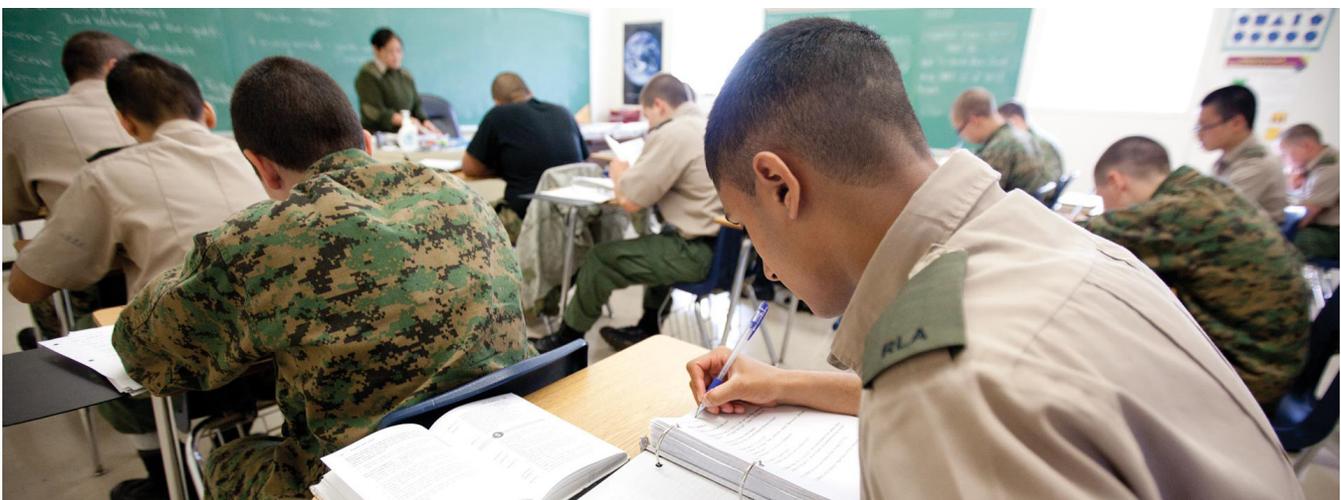
The reasons that families enroll are more varied than it might initially seem. Wendling says that while 'troubled teens' is an aspect of the RLA story, it is by no means the only one. "There are all kinds of different stories here, of boys who have come here for different reasons." They include boys who:

- are extremely intelligent but are academically undisciplined
- are struggling in their courses and require focus, extra time, and improved study skills to reach their potential.
- exhibit unregulated behavior
- could do very well elsewhere, but attend RLA because "this is the best way that they learn" through an approach that matches their academic personality
- require support for high-functioning learning challenges, including oppositional defiance disorder, OCD, and ADHD.

“Some of them don’t want to go to school because they’ve given up all hope,” says Harley. “Which seems to typically happen in grade 10 for some reason.

“I hear this story over, and over, and over again. There’s some trouble in Grade 8, and then there’s a shift to a new school for high school, and then there’s a serious deterioration because they’re trying to find new friends ... and they start to define themselves through saying ‘no’ to their parents. They’re placed into applied courses in grade 9, or at least some of them are [despite the fact that they are academically capable] and then in grade 10 the bottom just drops right out of it. They stop handing in assignments and stop going to school. And there’s a crisis.”

What all the students share, to varying degrees, is the lack of a vision of their success, a true apprehension of their talents, and a positive view of their future. Because of the struggles they’ve been having either personally or in prior academic settings, post-secondary education isn’t on their radar. That’s true for many teens, of course, and university can seem like a lifetime away. For many of those who enroll at Robert Land, it’s compounded by a negative sense of their abilities, one that has unfortunately been reinforced by their life experience. The work of the school is to reinstate a student’s sense of their abilities, to bring a sense of possibility, and to prepare them for post-secondary life, personally and academically.



4. Academics

Many might associate military school with remediation, and while there is perhaps an element of that at Robert Land, administrators are clear that students are admitted based on their potential rather than their past. All are academically able, though students typically enroll with less, in many cases far less, than exemplary academic records. That said, the coursework is challenging, commensurate with that of university preparatory programs across the country. The majority improve their marks by at least a full letter grade within their first year at the school.

The instructional spaces are stark and regimented. Where other schools might place an emphasis on progressive methods of instruction and moveable furniture, the approach at Robert Land is as traditional as you will find anywhere in the country today. Desks are placed in rows facing the instructor at the front of the room. Most classes contain a blackboard in addition to some adaptations for technology, though for the most part instruction is didactic. There is an element of rote instruction and a strong focus on core academics and competencies: reading, writing, and numeracy.

The program is very much a liberal arts offering, one that doesn't intend to educate students to the vocations, but rather to develop core literacies, educating them to engage creatively, thoughtfully, and respectfully with the world around them. "Looking at it realistically," says Harley, "if you're not able to read and intelligently analyze what you've read, and be able to convey it and express it, you're going to have problems with whatever you do. So I don't think that essay writing is a skill you can easily abandon. Because it's too valuable. And it's very valuable for organizing your thoughts."

"We tell students that getting into university is one thing, getting through is another," says Harley. "What they're often not aware of is that this is the beginning." That includes instruction in how to organize time responsibly, from using a planner to making the most of academic resources and guidance in order to think ahead and adopt a longer view of their academic career and what it requires of them.



The success of the program is perhaps most evident in the closing parade, the academy's equivalent of convocation. There, graduating students are announced, including what they will be moving to in the coming year. In 2017, all the graduates were going to university that fall except one who had deferred university admission in order to take a gap year. It's remarkable because, when perhaps a majority of them arrived, university acceptance may not have appeared to be a realistic goal.

The instructional day

Students wake up at 6am each day, with inspection at 7 and breakfast at 7:45. The instructional day extends from 9 to 4, with sports, club activities, and tutorial sessions from then until dinner at 5:45. In the evenings students take part in mandatory study hall, after which they have time to prepare their barracks and personal belongings, including shining their boots. Lights out is 9:45 for the younger students, 10:30 for the older.

All students meet together in the dining hall for meals, which are served family-style. Staff and administrators sit at a head table, which in other settings might feel onerous, though in the context of RLA is appropriate, a natural expression of the social organization of the school. Respect is a foundation of the program, and it is actively expressed at every moment. Boys earn the responsibility of serving the head table, a task that they complete with obvious pride. When there are visitors in the dining hall, they sit at the head table, and are served by students who, at least in our experience, are clearly proud of their role and their school, and eager to show it off. Whenever the headmaster enters or leaves the hall, students are brought to attention by a boy seated near the door. It's jarring—an unexpected flurry of activity, with wooden chairs scraping loudly on the floor—but it works in consort with all the aspects of daily life, reinforcing the respect that students have for the place, for others, and ultimately for themselves.

5. Extracurricular activities

Throughout there is focus on physical education, and daily life is very active. The range of activities is more limited than you might expect for a more typical boarding school, though that's a product of the school's size and mandate. There are sports and intramurals, and students have opportunities to take part in adventure sports and training, including mountain biking, scuba diving, and parachuting.

“Some of the little boys, when they come here,” says Harley, “they’ve never gone fishing, they’ve never gone camping. They’ve never seen anything that was alive that wasn’t in a zoo or in a cage.” That all changes when they arrive at RLA. Informal outdoor activities—running around, catching fish, bothering the frogs—offer a welcome and needed contrast to regimentation of life at the school. “He fishes on Saturdays,” says Julie Hunt of her son David. “He’s like the frogger of the group. And it’s boy stuff. They do a lot of stuff where he can expel energy.”



Being the only military school of its kind in the country, RLA has to look beyond that milieu when programming extracurricular competition. Teams compete with regional public schools through membership of SOSSA, the Southern Ontario Secondary Schools Association. Varsity sports include basketball, wrestling, cross country, soccer, and volleyball.

Athletics, he feels, nicely augment the school's mission. "The advantage of team sports," says Harley, "is that it compels you to cooperate with other people in a joint effort. And ... we see that as being a very important part of growing up and learning social skills. ... learning through doing, and also learning the fundamental lesson that other people are not objects, but sentient creatures just like you, is one of the lessons of growing up."

It's about inclusion, too. "He was able to play on all of the sports teams that he wanted to play on," says Doug Deschner of his son. "I would venture to say that he probably wouldn't have had that opportunity in some other school situations," primarily given some social issues. "And that's something that really makes him feel proud."

He continues, "He did the Bataan death march," an annual march in New Mexico conducted in honour of service members who defended the Philippine Islands during World War II. "Seven of them attended, and they were chosen to go because they met the qualifications. He was so proud of that. They did a marathon in the desert. He is certified, he can now scuba dive. He has an opportunity to parachute this year. You see those things, you know, when you look at the site online, and it seems like a distant dream. But it's true. Here he is able to say, at 16 years old, 'I've completed a marathon, and I can scuba dive,' and all the rest of it."

"Here he is able to say, at 16 years old, 'I've completed a marathon, and I can scuba dive'"

The Fall Exercise

The Fall Exercise is one of the highlights of the academic year. For three days the entire student body marches just shy of 90 km along the edge of the Niagara Escarpment, extending from the academy grounds to Queenston Heights on the Niagara River. It's a physical challenge, given the distance and the requirement that the group transports all the provisions themselves, including a replica cannon used in a ceremony once they reach the destination.

That said, in the minds of students and faculty, it's not simply a physical endeavor, but also a heavily symbolic one. It marks membership within a group and within the school. Afterward, students are proud of having completed the trek, for which they also earn a badge. It's not easy and, given that it occurs in October, the weather can be one of the difficulties. Nevertheless, the sense of pride derives from more than the distance, or the mud, or the rain. Many students, for the first time, have completed a significant task, and have done it as part of a group of peers, all of them contributing equally to a common goal. As such, it affords a unique opportunity to participate in something larger than themselves, and, by extension, confers a profound sense of belonging.

The students spend their second night of the exercise in the barracks of historic Fort George, a key post in the War of 1812, now a national historic site. The ceremony the next day at the completion of the trek includes a bit of pomp—they fire the cannon, among other things—and relates the exercise back to the military heritage of the region, all at the site of one of its most historic battles. The event marks the first opportunity for many of the new students to advance from the rank of recruit to that of cadet. It's all incredibly moving, and in many ways the Fall Exercise is an analogue for the work of the school.

6. Pastoral care, well-being, and discipline

Despite being said often, it nevertheless bears repeating: this isn't your typical school. "We're a school of need versus want," says Allan Spaan, an administrator. "There are lots of private schools that a parent wants to send their children to. Here you really need them to go to an academy."

While not always the case, for many families Robert Land is an option of last resort. They may never have considered private school before, let alone boarding school. That said, they turn to Robert Land as a means of getting their children onto a more productive path forward. Invariably, the school succeeds at that and then some. "Robert Land Academy gave my son back when nobody else could," says a parent of the school. "I tremble to think how we would have dealt with his frustrations had he not had this school."



If you ask students if they like attending Robert Land, most will understandably respond, as one student did, “no one really loves it here,” drawing out that “loves.” That carries over into the general feel on campus. Students don’t gather around to gossip, or to heckle faculty in the hallways. Students whisper to each other as they brush past, rather than stopping to have a gab. Activities, like classroom work, are orderly in ways that we’re perhaps unused to seeing these days. Everything is monitored, including calls home to parents. On returning from a visit home, students are searched.

It can appear unfeeling, yet in truth it isn’t, as more prolonged visits to campus will attest. (Which is one of the reasons we absolutely, heartily suggest that all families visit the school, allowing ample time to tour the grounds and speak with students and staff. Tours are conducted by students alone, something that is telling of the confidence the school has in its program.) There is a genuine appreciation on the part of the faculty for the students, one that is reciprocated in the considerable majority of instances. It’s apparent in subtle ways, perhaps, but it’s nevertheless apparent for those who take the time to see it.

Motivation, including pride in achievement, is at the heart of the administration of care. Students typically don’t arrive with a healthy self-concept, whether or not they are aware of that fact. The school intends to give them ample opportunities to improve their sense of themselves and their understanding of their talents and abilities. Many of the things that some might see as onerous—the constant attention to detail, the daily inspections, the ranks, the regimentation—provide, for these students, a chance to prove themselves, both to themselves and others. Achievements are recognized regularly, formally during meal times. Often for the first time in their lives, students are absolutely clear what is expected of them, just as they are intimately aware that their achievements won’t go unnoticed.

“It’s all about applying yourself,” says Ferri (’17). “There are boys that come here with good attitudes and bad attitudes, and there’s a certain point where they’re going to have to choose whether they’re going to accept it and apply themselves to the program. And if they do, they generally succeed. If not, it’s a longer road, but it usually happens eventually.”

The students' relationship to discipline is often in contrast to what they might have experienced prior. A boy who swears, for example, will be asked to run a few laps of the parade ground. (How many laps? "It depends on the word you use," says student David Hunt, chuckling. "If you were to drop an f bomb, it would be like ten laps.") The same might be true for someone who is acting up in class or not following instructions. Students comment that some of the reasons for laps are strikingly lame. Which may be true from their perspective, though faculty often use them, and other similar disciplinary actions, more as a support than anything punitive. It's a break; a chance to let off a few beans. Does everybody run laps at some point? "I can't name one person who hasn't," says Hunt. His classmate, Ziwei Gao, adds, "Everybody has been frustrated by something." Certainly, that's true.

Larger issues—bullying, substance abuse—are dealt with empathetically, though at Robert Land, it's exceedingly difficult for those kinds of behaviours to occur. Local police use the campus as a training facility for the K-9 teams, so dogs are often run through the barracks and elsewhere. There isn't a moment on campus in which students aren't actively supervised. As such, it's exceedingly difficult for a student to have something they shouldn't, and exceptionally hard for them to make use of substances or be abusive to others.

"There are no drugs here, no alcohol or cigarettes" says Dr. Harley with striking confidence, and that confidence isn't misplaced. He's right. There really aren't. "The barracks are set up so that there is an adult awake all night long in each one of them, and there are four security cameras. And that prevents stupidity, like bullying, which happens in a lot of schools, and which a lot of schools talk about doing something about and, in fact, rarely do. Because they cannot control what happens the moment kids leave the school grounds."

He admits that all of those measures also offer students personal security. "If I was coming here, my first fear would be 'what's going to happen to me when the lights go out.' And because of the setup, you're safe, you're secure. You don't have to worry about bullying or hazing or anything of the sort."



If, for the sake of argument, a student were caught with, say, marijuana, says Harley:

“They would be put on charge and they would lose a whole lot of privileges. We wouldn’t expel them. But sneaking anything in here is difficult and largely it’s unproductive. Because, okay, you sneak a joint in. You also have to have a match to light it. But then you also have to have this gap of time and space where you can smoke it. And you can’t smoke it in the barracks because the moment you took it out and lit it, it’s all over. So you’d have to be outside when, when you’re not being watched, and when people wouldn’t smell it, and when you came in, people didn’t smell it on you. So the fact of the matter is that it’s a foregone conclusion that even if you were successful, you’re going to get caught. And when you’re caught, you lose a whole whack of privileges. So then the calculus is: so was it worth it? And the answer, universally, is no. But we wouldn’t expel anybody.”

A full-time registered nurse is present on campus. In addition, a consulting social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, sports therapist, and medical doctor all have weekly offices on site, and are otherwise available for consultation as needed.

7. Getting in

The application process, as with any private school, is conducted in order to ensure the school is the right fit for the family and the student. Interviews are required, including a short interview with the prospective student in isolation. They can be conducted remotely if necessary, though a visit to the school is highly recommended.

There is a common belief that students are often sent to military academy against their will. The policy at Robert Land, however, explicitly disallows that. Student interviews are required to ensure academic fitness as well as intent: that each candidate is aware of the benefits of attending the school, and that each is fully involved in the decision to enroll. “We will not take boys here who do not want to be here,” says Harley, and the admissions process is the primary means of ensuring that all boys arrive willingly, cognizant of the opportunities and the challenges that Robert Land represents.



8. Money matters

Tuition includes instruction, room, board, and a list of incidentals like laundry. Tuition doesn't include uniforms or fees associated with some discretionary programs, such as skydiving. A mandatory tuck deposit of \$2000 is collected at the beginning of each year, which is used to cover incidentals, including travel costs that may arise in association with extracurricular activities. That said, there are fewer opportunities for discretionary spending than perhaps is typical at other private schools. Anything remaining of the initial tuck deposit is returned at the end of the school year.

Also not included in tuition are fees for accommodating students during school holidays and vacations. Students typically visit home for a weekend each month, though they have the option, for a fee, of remaining on campus during monthly stand-downs and the duration of March break. The fees can be prorated, or even charged on a daily basis, and cover lodging, meals, and activities. There is, however, no provision for the December/January break, as the campus is closed.

9. Parents/Alumni

Most parents of the school are geographically remote, though even those that aren't don't play a significant role, or indeed any role, in the daily life of the school. The interface between administration and parents, however, is close and detailed, with regular opportunities to check in on progress and acclimation. Parents report that points of contact include administration and the nurse in addition to faculty. Email is more typical than phone calls, though both are options and responses are prompt. Conference calls are efficiently arranged whenever warranted.

Says parent Doug Deschner, “We went for our first parent-teacher interview two months after he was there. So, it had only been a short time, but they told us everything ... they said ‘here’s where he’s struggling, here’s where he is, this is how it’s shaping up.’ And they had a plan in place to help him succeed. And we looked at each other and said, ‘they totally get him.’”

“We had some questions early on about how he was, and Dr. Harley responded with an eloquent letter that really put us at ease. What he ultimately said to us is you just need to give us a little more time with your son. And he was right.” Parents report a high level of confidence and satisfaction with how communications are conducted, often singling out Lisa Lake, director of operations and communications, for praise. “She’s phenomenal,” says Deschner. “She usually gets back to us within minutes.”

Alumni are becoming more involved through a growing network. Annual regional meetings are planned by alumni themselves, and therefore are relatively informal. Likewise, all are welcome to return to the school for the annual parade, and many retain ongoing contact with administration, something that is further serviced through an alumni newsletter.

10. The takeaway

“It’s saved his life,” says Vicki Deschner of her son Kolby, now in his fourth year at RLA. “Due to trauma, disruption in his early years, he was so—I’m not sure if oppositional defiant is quite the right term—he was au contraire to everything. Especially authority.” Now, happily, he’s literally the lead guy at the head of the parade, not only recognizing the authority of others, but recognizing it within himself.

Kolby arrived in order to get a second chance, and he’s found it. Prior, while there are no specific diagnoses at play, he was struggling both academically and socially, despite being very academically capable. Since arriving, he has gained a new sense of himself as readily as others have gained a new sense of him. Rather than the odd man out, never chosen for teams, he has found a place to belong, to take a role and be genuinely involved. He’s experienced failure in a supportive setting, gained in the knowledge that there is an opportunity to change, to improve, to redeem any missteps. He’s succeeding academically, and is on track for post-secondary studies.

That’s what Robert Land Academy does for students, and is something they’ve been doing for more than four decades. The program “builds up confidence in small steps,” says Harley, “and I think that confidence is based upon genuine achievement. And no matter how small or trivial it is, it’s genuine recognition for something that they did.” The academic program is demonstrably strong, but for the students that enroll, it’s that growing sense of confidence and self-worth that is most transformative.

RLA isn’t for everyone, to be sure. The goal of any private school is to address a specific segment of the learner population, and Robert Land is a fantastic reminder of that. Some students would find the program confining, though perhaps not as many as we might think. The boys that attend the school are those who, for a whole range of reasons, need structure in order to succeed: clear goals, clear consequences, and consistent routines with an equally consistent application of care.

If we have a proviso, this is it: this is a school that you need to experience in order to appreciate. It's not simply that the common beliefs of military school don't hold—and in this case they most certainly don't—but that the school succeeds in ways that many are unable to fathom. You have to see it, and to spend a bit of time acclimating to what is really going on, to truly believe it. It's not about the buildings, it's about the students and the journey that they've undertaken. Many arrive without hope, and they leave with a future. ■



Copyright © 2017 by Our Kids Media
All rights reserved

Photography by Mike Pochwat for Our Kids Media in combination
with images supplied by Robert Land Academy

Since 1997, Our Kids has offered the most complete directory of private and independent schools in Canada, and each fall hosts the largest Private School Expos in Canada.

For reviews of more than 200 leading Canadian private schools, visit
www.ourkids.net/private-school-reviews

Our Kids Media—Canada’s Trusted Source for families looking for the best for their children. In print, online, and in person.

www.ourkids.net