



HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

2SLGBTQIA+ Community and the Canadian Military

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Historical Overview

Throughout Canada's history, Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual Plus (2SLGBTQIA+) people have participated in military service. However, even after Canada changed its laws in 1969 to stop making homosexuality illegal, these service members still had to hide who they were because of unfair rules and policies. Over time, and amid a broader movement for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights in Canada, the military has taken steps toward becoming a more inclusive and accepting institution.

Hidden Service in the World Wars

In Canada, homosexuality remained illegal until 1969. Lawmakers and most voters justified discrimination because of social perceptions that defined homosexual relationships as moral deviance from heterosexual norms. The military, long perceived as a bastion of masculinity, reinforced these norms through policies forbidding homosexuality. The military scrutinized and surveilled service members for their sexual orientation.

Despite official prohibitions, queer people did enlist and serve. During the World Wars, gay soldiers were persecuted, court-martialed, and discharged. While most gay soldiers hid their identity, recent research suggests that, once discovered, many escaped persecution and punishment for their sexual orientation as the result of the camaraderie, friendships, and respect accrued from their peers. Even some of those who were actively persecuted and subjected to court martial were able to continue fighting. Some of these soldiers who died during the First World War have their names inscribed on the Vimy Memorial.

Persecution of LGBTQ+ Canadians serving in the military escalated during the Cold War. Starting in the late 1940s, a fear was created that LGBTQ+ public servants could be subjected to blackmail by Soviet agents to reveal state secrets. In reaction, Canada banned LGBTQ+ people from serving in the government, even though heterosexual personnel could also be subject to sexual blackmail. The Canadian government's tremendous effort to search for, shame, and fire queer personnel was later termed the LGBT Purge.

The military was no exception in implementing this policy as the institution involved in the security and defence of Canada. It gave its commanding officers and the Special Investigation Unit the power to investigate anyone suspected of being a gay, bisexual, or trans service member. Investigations could lead to the dismissal of the suspected member from the Canadian military.

As a result, LGBTQ+ members of the Canadian military had to hide who they were if they wanted to continue serving. They were surveilled and had to adapt in order to survive. The constant surveillance and forced removal were traumatic. The nation they sought to serve was refusing their service and also rejecting their identity. This led survivors of the Purge to experience shame and depression. To Purge survivor Kareth Huber, her situation felt akin to being a “prisoner of war” in her own country.

Legal Challenges and a National Apology

The decriminalization of homosexuality in 1969 led to the military slowly relaxing some of its policies, but prohibitions against LGBTQ+ members’ service remained in place. Michelle Douglas, a military police officer who had been interrogated and discharged for being gay, sued the government in 1990 on the grounds that her dismissal violated the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom*. This formal challenge against the military’s discriminatory practice succeeded. The government settled out of court, and the military revoked its anti-LGBTQ+ regulations shortly afterwards. While the settlement was a success and a cornerstone for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights in Canada, the community was scarred — a hurt the government of Canada had yet to recognize.

It was not until 2016 that survivors of the LGBT Purge settled a class action lawsuit with the government of Canada. The settlement marked a new turning point in the emotional healing of the survivors. They were compensated for the harm endured and received the Canada Pride Citation, and most notably, the Prime Minister issued a national apology on behalf of Canada to the survivors in Parliament in 2017. Steven Deschamps, an air force public officer who had been discharged and publicly humiliated in 1982 for being gay, described the moment as having “rejuvenated” [him] and so many of [his] colleagues who were Purge survivors, saying “My life changed completely. And what I mean by that is, ... I was actively involved, but now I was my wholesome self. I was ... I was vindicated from that dark period of time.” For many, the national apology marked the beginning of healing, a public affirmation of their dignity.

Recognition, Pride, and Ongoing Challenges

Today, the Canadian military recognizes and celebrates Pride and has champions who advocate for the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ service members. Two Purge Survivors, Michelle Douglas and Stephen Deschamps, serve as Canadian Armed Forces honorary colonels. The government continues to acknowledge its past, thanks in large part to the activism of 2SLGBTQIA+ veterans.

Challenges remain, as 2SLGBTQIA+ servicemembers are more likely to experience sexual misconduct than their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts, and informal forms of discrimination and harassment have continued to take place. Yet, people within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community have always been part of Canada’s military, serving with

resilience and commitment, even in the face of systemic discrimination. Today, they no longer have to hide their gender and sexual identities to proudly serve Canada and Canadians.

* The language and terminology that communities have used to define and classify sexual orientation and gender identity have changed over time. We generally use 2SLGBTQIA+ to refer to these communities but have used LGBT or LGBTQ+ to reflect historical usage when discussing Cold War-era discrimination and the LGBT Purge.