



HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Families and the Canadian Military

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Historical Overview

Canadian military families have long been shaped by the unique demands of military life, navigating both pride and sacrifice. From frequent relocations to extended separations, these families face challenges distinct from most civilians. Over time, government and military policies have evolved to support them. Military families have adapted, advocated for change, and been altered by service — both during and after military life.

The Impact of Military Life on Families

Military families have supported their loved ones' service in war and peace. Every military family member, both in the past and present, has their own unique experiences that can be both challenging and rewarding. Some enjoy the camaraderie or take pride in their loved ones' efforts to defend Canadian values. However, frequent relocations, long separations due to training and deployments, and the persistent fear for a loved one's safety are also part of their everyday reality. A 2013 study showed that military families move three times more often than other families. However, unlike most people, they don't choose when or where they move — the military decides that for them.

These pressures affect the entire family. For example, military spouses can have a hard time finding steady jobs, daycare, and health care.

Military children face their own struggles, like having to switch schools a lot, make new friends, and adjust to different school rules. While these problems happen to other Canadians too, life in a military family is a bit different. That's because military members make a special promise to put their country first, even before their own needs.

To help with these challenges, the Canadian government and military have created programs that have changed over time. Historically, these supports were for heterosexual families, and 2SLGBTQIA+ families faced discrimination. Although the Canadian Armed Forces began extending formal benefits to same-sex couples after same-sex marriage was legalized in 2005, 2SLGBTQIA+ military families are not always fully accepted.

The Canadian government provided limited assistance to military families before the world wars. Relatives received support such as pensions for soldiers' widows who lost their husbands in the Northwest Resistance of 1885, Separation Allowances in the First World War and Dependents' Allowances in the Second World War. Nevertheless, the amount received typically did not cover living costs and was shaped by factors such as gender and rank.

During and after the world wars, the federal government introduced new measures for military families that also changed Canadian society. In 1917, the Wartime Elections Act granted the wives, mothers, and sisters of Canadian service personnel serving overseas the right to vote in federal elections. These were among the first women to vote federally.

After the Second World War, many Canadian soldiers married European women and had children overseas. The government therefore helped bring these new families to Canada. Between 1942 and 1948, more than 43,000 wives and nearly 21,000 children moved to Canada. Most were from the United Kingdom, and they brought new customs and strengthened Canada's connections to Britain.

During the Cold War, the Department of National Defence (DND) expanded military housing, recreation centres, and schools in Canada and abroad. In 1953, the government began allowing families to accompany service personnel on international postings and families soon joined those serving in West Germany and France. Many enjoyed travelling and remember their time fondly. Tight-knit communities on military bases in Canada and abroad helped military families cope with the frequent moves. However, these communities also dealt with gossiping and DND had no official organization to help families navigate the demands of military life. In the late 1980s, military wives created organizations to share their experiences and concerns. Their efforts helped lead to the creation of Military Family Services (MFS) in 1991.

In the 1990s and 2000s, more military families began living off base. By 2013, 85 percent lived in civilian neighbourhoods. This shift created feelings of isolation for some, as civilians often don't understand military life. Canada's war in Afghanistan (2001–2014) cost the lives of 158 Canadian Armed Forces personnel and placed additional strain on military families. As in past periods when Canadians serving abroad faced heightened dangers, some military children struggled to concentrate in school as they worried over their parent's safety and took on more responsibilities at home.

In 2008, the Canadian military issued the Canadian Forces Family Covenant. It officially acknowledged that the strength of the military depends on the sacrifices of families and promised to support them in partnership with their communities.

Leaving the Military

Military families also experience a transition when their loved one leaves the military. Some veterans face physical and mental injuries which ripple through their families. Family members might have unanswered questions as veterans are often reluctant to discuss their service.

Despite the ongoing challenges they face, military families continue to adapt, support one another, and foster a deep connection to military life. This sense of identity and shared sacrifice contributes to a strong tradition of service, with many military family members enlisting in the Canadian Armed Forces themselves.

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