



CANADIAN WAR
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In Their Own Voices

An Online Oral History Exhibition

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Canada and the Korean War, 1950–1953

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A company of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry moves in single file across rice paddies as it advances on enemy positions across the valley, 1951.

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Historical Overview

Canada was one of sixteen countries to send military forces to defend South Korea, supported by the United States, following an invasion by North Korean forces on June 25, 1950. North Korean forces, supported by the Soviet Union, were later reinforced with Chinese troops. The Korean War raged for three years until the United Nations, China, and North Korea signed an armistice agreement on July 27, 1953.

About the War

Korea had been occupied by Imperial Japan since 1910. When Japan was forced to surrender at the end of the Second World War, Japanese forces left the Korean peninsula. As part of the postwar settlement, Korea was divided along the 38th parallel. The northern half was occupied by Soviet troops, and American troops occupied the south. Two competing governments were set up in North and South Korea modeled in part on Soviet and American policies.

North Korea invaded the South on June 25, 1950 to reunify Korea under communist rule. South Korea appealed for United Nations support to repel the invasion. Canada decided to join the UN effort, first sending three Royal Canadian Navy destroyers. These destroyers patrolled Korea's western and eastern coasts, escorting vessels, supporting commando landings, evacuating forces under threat, and firing on shore targets.

The Canadian Army began recruiting a special force for Korea in August 1950, and the first of these troops arrived on Korean soil in December of that year, after the Chinese army had joined the war on North Korea's side. On April 24–25, 1951, Australian, Canadian, New Zealander, and American troops withstood a concentrated attack at the Battle of Kapyong. Canadians fought a defensive war from 1951 onwards to keep the United Nations lines in place.

The war eventually ground to a stalemate characterized by nighttime patrols, heated artillery battles, and raids. The war was fought on hilltops, with the valleys between forming a type of no man's land. Casualties suffered during the fighting were treated at Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals,

popularly known as MASH, or at Field Dressing Stations. Those seriously injured would be treated at the British Commonwealth General Hospital in Kure, Japan, where Canadian women served as military nurses, physiotherapists, and dieticians. A smaller number of servicewomen also worked at the 25th Canadian Field Dressing Station in Korea itself, beginning in 1953.

The Royal Canadian Air Force's 425 Squadron supported the UN effort through an aerial resupply mission. These crews braved 80-hour round-trip flights to ferry important supplies and conduct medical evacuations. Canadian pilots also served on exchange with the United States Air Force, flying missions against Chinese MiG jets over North Korea.

The war ended in an armistice that took nearly two years to negotiate. Signed on July 27, 1953, the armistice created a demilitarized zone that separated North and South Korea. The last Canadian units left Korea in 1957. By that time more than 30,000 Canadians had served in Korea, and 516 Canadians had died in connection with the war.

Remembering the War

Canadians who fought in Korea returned to a country that had largely forgotten about their service as the war was being fought. Returning veterans were not always welcomed in traditional gathering spots such as their local legion halls. It was for these reasons that Korean War veterans often referred to their service as a “forgotten war.”

It was not until the 1970s that the first Korean War veterans associations began to form and agitate for better recognition of their efforts to defend South Korea and Canadian interests during the Cold War.

Many of these veterans were later welcomed back to Korea on sponsored revisits for veterans and their family members. These return visits were deeply meaningful for veterans, who saw the impoverished, war-devastated land they fought in transformed into a vibrant, successful democracy, which was the most lasting impact of their war.



Thomas Estabrooks served in the Royal Canadian Navy during the Korean War. To learn more about why he thinks men of his generation were so lucky, visit the *In Their Own Voices* online exhibition and listen to his clip.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Estabrooks.