



## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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# Canada's Veterans

## Historical Overview

Throughout Canadian history, veterans have played a crucial role in transforming their communities and the nation as a whole. They have been at the forefront of the fight for political equity, they've forced changes in public attitudes about the role of women in Canadian society, and they've taken on leading roles in politics, business, activism and art. Their influence on others can also be more personal and intimate. Veterans are often shaped by their service. They acquire unique perspectives and insights and sometimes painful memories. The impacts of these changes can ripple through their families and those close to them long after their service ends.

## About Veterans

Everyone who served in the military is a veteran, whether they experienced combat or not, and whether that service occurred during the Second World War or just last year.

Veterans hold certain rights, which have varied over time. During the First World War (1914–1918), the Canadian government provided programs for returning veterans, including rehabilitation services, a military hospital system, and government-issued loans to purchase farmland. The Second World War (1939–1945) saw the creation of the Department of Veterans Affairs in 1944 and the establishment of the Veterans Charter, which offered jobs training, land grants, access to university education, and other programs.

But not all who served in war were acknowledged as veterans. After the Second World War, members of Canada's merchant navy sought recognition and access to programs, but they were denied. Those civilian sailors had risked their lives to transport essential military resources and food overseas but were not considered veterans by the state. Surviving members fought for decades to obtain veteran status, finally achieving their goal in 2000.

Today, programs and services continue to evolve to address the needs of new generations of veterans and their families.

## Life After Service

The transition from military to civilian life has no single narrative. Thousands of veterans easily settled into the next stage of their lives, while others faced unemployment, broken relationships, and disillusionment with a society that

could not fully understand what they had been through. Many veterans suffered from visible and invisible wounds. For some, post-traumatic stress and physical disabilities altered their lives.

For many former members of the military, their years in service were formative, and their identity as a veteran was important to them. Some joined veterans' organizations, such as the Royal Canadian Legion, to celebrate and reinforce the bonds of their common identity. Others preferred to put memories of their time in the military behind them and focus only on the future.

Following the First and Second World Wars, many veterans made pilgrimages to distant battle sites. They often reflected on comrades who never came home, demanding that those sacrifices be remembered. Veterans also came together in reunions to keep alive the shared bonds of wartime service.

Being a veteran carries status in society. It demonstrates a person's willingness to sacrifice for their country. Many Black, Asian and Indigenous veterans harnessed this status to fight against discriminatory laws or policies targeting their communities. Their work has been instrumental in the struggle for voting rights and other civil rights in Canada.

Canadian women's military service has similarly shifted public attitudes about what women can accomplish, resulting in changes to the position of women in civilian society too.

While some veterans chose to keep their memories private, others found satisfaction in sharing their stories with each other, their loved ones, and the broader public.

Whether they are oral testimonies or written memoirs, these valuable resources help people understand the service and sacrifice of Canada's veterans.