

CANADA AND THE KOREAN WAR

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Introduction: The smoke had barely cleared from the battlefields of World War II when Canadians, many of them veterans of the world conflict, found themselves involved in a far-off location in a conflict that became known as the Korean War, or to many of those who participated – the Forgotten War.

This paper provides a brief overview of the war and, in particular, the Canadian role in the conflict. Almost 27,000 Canadians served under United Nations (UN) command in Korea or Japan. The Korean War involved more Canadian troops than any other war in the country's history other than the two World Wars.^{1,2}

Background: War came to Korea at dawn on a Sunday morning. At 0400 local time on June 25, 1950 the Korean People's Army launched its offensive against the Republic of Korea (ROK).³ The invasion came as a complete surprise to the world. The United Nations Commission on Korea (UNCOK) characterised the invasion as, "an act of aggression initiated without warning and without provocation, in execution of a carefully prepared plan"⁴ The invading forces made short work of the unprepared defenders and by the following day, 26 June, were in the suburbs of Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

Korea had been split into the communist north and the democratic south at the 38th parallel as one of the terms of the Potsdam Agreement of July 26, 1945. Following the end of World War II, responsibility for Korean unification was handed to the UN and UNCOK was formed to deliver that mandate.

The Republic of Korea was formally proclaimed on August 15, 1948 with Syngman Rhee as president. The United States, United Kingdom, France and Canada recognised the Republic of Korea (ROK). On December 3, 1948, a new Supreme People's Democratic Assembly ratified a new constitution and Kim Il Sung assumed office as Premier of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.



Syngman Rhee, 1958
(Source – Wikipedia)

On December 12, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly recognised the South Korean government as being the only one based on "the free will of the electorate" in Korea.⁵

¹ George F. Stanley: *Canada's Soldiers*, Rev. Ed, MacMillan Company of Canada, 1960, p.404

² More Canadians served in Vietnam, however, they served in United States uniforms.

³ David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War*, St. Martins Press, 1964, p.3

⁴ Ibid p.6

⁵ Ibid p.13

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Neither Korean state became a UN member.

On 27 June, in reaction to the North Korean invasion, United States President Truman announced, "... *I have ordered United States air and sea forces to give the Korean Government troops cover and support...*".⁶

Later the same day, the United Nations Security Council resolved to "*furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore the international peace and security in the area*".⁷

The orders that completed the military commitment of the United States went out from the Pentagon at 1322 on Friday, 30 June and the first two companies of the 24th Infantry Division arrived in Pusan by air on 1 July and immediately deployed to meet the enemy.⁸ On June 30, 1950, a United Nations Command for the prosecution of the war was established in Tokyo under General Douglas MacArthur.⁹

Meanwhile, the North Koreans were pushing rapidly forward through the valleys and rice paddies of the Korean peninsula. The South Korean capital, Seoul, was occupied on 28 June, and by the first week of August the UN forces were confined within the "Pusan Perimeter", a small area in the southeast of the peninsula. They were still being hard pressed when, on 15 September, a successful allied amphibious landing was made at Inchon, the port of Seoul. This assault, coupled with a breakout from the Pusan bridgehead, changed the military situation overnight. The North Korean troops were soon in precipitate retreat.



Douglas MacArthur c.1945
(Source – Wikipedia)

The UN forces moved rapidly northward, recaptured Seoul, and on October 7, 1950 following an ultimatum for surrender from MacArthur,¹⁰ crossed the 38th Parallel and advanced towards the border of Manchuria. Then Communist China intervened. On 25 October, to the surprise of the Allied command, strong Chinese forces crossed the frontier and launched a massive offensive which drove the UN and South Korean armies back across the 38th Parallel to positions well to the south along the Imjin River.¹¹

⁶ Ibid p.24

⁷ Ibid p.24

⁸ Ibid pp.27-28

⁹ <http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=history/KoreaWar/chronology>

¹⁰ Clubb, O.Edmund, *Twentieth Century China*, Columbia University Press, 1967, p.339

¹¹ <http://www.korean-war.com/canada.html>

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Source: <http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=Korean+War+-+Map&qpv=Korean+War+-+Map&FORM=IGRE>

The Canadians: On June 28, 1950 Lester Pearson, then Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, commended the United States for its prompt response to the emergency. He believed that Canada must respond as well through the UN and under US military

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leadership. Pearson emphasized, however, that any Canadian participation would be part of a UN, not an American, operation.¹²

The Canadian Government, while agreeing in principle with the moves made to halt aggression, did not immediately commit its forces to action in Korea. At the close of the Second World War the Canadian armed forces had been reduced to peacetime strength. In the summer of 1950, Canada had but one brigade under arms.¹³ Furthermore, the Far East had never been an area in which Canada had any special national interest.

The first Canadian aid to the hard-pressed UN forces came from the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). On July 12, 1950 three Canadian destroyers, *HMCS Cayuga*, *HMCS Athabaskan* and *HMCS Sioux*, were dispatched to Korean waters to serve under United Nations Command. They supported the landings at Inchon and played an important role in the evacuation which followed the Chinese intervention. In the latter, a large body of American troops was cut off in the Chinampo area. The three Canadian destroyers, together with Australian and American destroyers, negotiated the difficult Taedong River to successfully cover their embarkation.¹⁴

Also in July, a Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) squadron was assigned to air transport duties with the United Nations. No. 426 (Transport) Squadron flew regularly scheduled flights between McCord Air Force Base, Washington, and Haneda Airfield, Tokyo throughout the campaign.

On August 7, 1950, as the Korean crisis deepened, the Government of Prime Minister Louis St Laurent authorized the recruitment of the Canadian Army Special Force, a brigade *"to be available for carrying out Canada's obligations"*.¹⁵ The original components of the Special Force included the second battalions of the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR), Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), and Royal 22e Régiment (R22eR); "C" Squadron of Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians); 2nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery (RCHA); 57th Canadian Independent Field Squadron, Royal Canadian Engineers (RCE); 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade Signal Squadron; No. 54 Canadian Transport Company, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC); and No. 25 Field Ambulance, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (RCAMC).

On 8 August, Brigadier J.M. Rockingham accepted command of the Canadian Infantry Brigade. Following the Inchon landings and the UN successes of September and October the war in Korea seemed to be near its end. Instead of a full brigade only the 2nd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel J.R. Stone, proceeded to Korea. The remainder of the "Special Force", now designated the 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade Group, continued training at Fort Lewis in the United States.

¹² <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0004370>

¹³ Stanley, p.398

¹⁴ <http://www.korean-war.com/canada.html>

¹⁵ Stanley, p.399

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It was during this period of training and readiness that an accident occurred. In November, 1950 a troop train carrying men from the 2nd Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, was travelling westbound towards Fort Lewis. Near Canoe River, British Columbia, their train collided head-on with an eastbound passenger liner on its way to Montreal. Some of the coaches on the military train were modern, and made of steel, while others were an older wooden vintage. When the trains collided, many of the wooden coaches were smashed to pieces. The cars from both trains were derailed, and piled on top of each other on a hillside. The crash took the lives of all 4 crewmen from both trains, as well as 17 soldiers from the RCHA.¹⁶

However, by the time the troopship steamed into Yokohama on December 14, 1950, the picture had completely changed. Communist China had intervened. In this charged atmosphere of unexpected disaster, the emphasis shifted to the speed with which the battalion could be thrown into action. The Patricias began an intensive training period at Miryang, near Taegu, where they also engaged in actions against guerrilla activities.

In mid-February 1951 the 2nd Battalion PPCLI took its place in the line as part of the 27th Commonwealth Brigade in time to participate in a general UN advance towards the 38th Parallel. This was a strenuous period for the Brigade. The country was rugged, the weather bitterly cold and, although the Chinese were withdrawing, a number of sharp encounters occurred. On 23/24 February the Canadian unit made its first contact with the enemy, and suffered its first casualties in the Korean hills. At the end of March the Canadians began to move into the Kapyong valley. By mid-April, the UN forces were sited north of the 38th Parallel.

On April 11, 1951 General MacArthur, due to differences of opinion with President Truman, was relieved of his command and replaced by Lieutenant-General Matthew B. Ridgway.

It had been suspected for some time that the Chinese were preparing another large-scale offensive, designed to check the UN advance. It came on April 22, 1951. The engagement, which followed, was one of the most severe of the entire Korean campaign. During the night of 22/23 April enemy forces struck in the western and west central sectors. In the attack the 6th ROK Division, overwhelmed and forced to retreat, was in danger of being cut off and completely destroyed. The task of the 27th Commonwealth Brigade was to hold open a withdrawal route through the Kapyong valley and to prevent deep enemy infiltration.

A defensive position was established with the 2nd PPCLI at Hill 677, the 1st Middlesex Regiment to the left and the 3rd Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) to the right. The Patricias, completely surrounded during part of the action and supplied by air, defended one height firmly during two days and a night of heavy fighting, losing 10 men killed and 23 wounded. For their gallant action in saving the Kapyong Valley, the 2nd PPCLI and the 3rd RAR

¹⁶ <http://www.canadianmilitary.page.tl/The-Korean-War.htm>

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received the US Presidential Citation. This was extraordinary recognition of foreign units by the United States

The rest of the 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade sailed for Korea in April 1951 in time to take part in a further advance to the 38th Parallel. The deployed units included "C" Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse; 2nd Regiment of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery; and the second battalions of the Royal Canadian Regiment and the Royal 22e Regiment.

These newly arrived battalions were deployed in support of the US 25th Division assault along the Ponchon River. In the course of this operation the Royal Canadian Regiment launched an attack upon the village of Chail-li and a neighbouring hill. The attack was successful, but the Brigade's advance had created a deep salient in the enemy lines. Without protection on the flanks, the unit was forced to withdraw. Following this action, 2nd PPCLI returned into the line and joined the Canadian Brigade.

The first action of the 25th Brigade, as a wholly Canadian formation, was to take up a position between the Chorwon and Chatan valleys. This involved a series of raids and patrols in exceedingly uncomfortable conditions – high temperatures, insects and vulnerability to sneak attacks by enemy forces.

Following this tasking, the Canadian Brigade was placed under the overall command of a newly formed British Commonwealth Division commanded by British Major-General J.H. Cassells.

At about the same time, in July 1951, at Communist instigation, cease-fire negotiations were begun near Kaesong on the 38th Parallel. These truce talks ran into difficulties at the outset and the suspicion prevailed that they were never intended by the Communists to produce an early peace, but were being used to gain military advantage.

A system of rotation for Canadian units was implemented. Brigadier J.V. Allard became Canadian commander in the theatre until 1954 when Brigadier F.A. Clift succeeded him, in turn, at the time of the final Canadian rotation.



BGen J.V. Allard

In October and November of 1951 the Chinese launched another series of attacks. In one engagement against the Royal 22e Régiment (R22eR) the focal point was Hill 355, an important feature which dominated most of the divisional front. During the night of 23/24 November the R22eR, were attacked several times after heavy shelling, but no ground was lost, even when one of their forward platoons had been dislodged and another surrounded.

As cease-fire negotiations were renewed, orders were given on 27 November that no further fighting patrols were to go out and that artillery action was to be restricted to defensive fire and counter-bombardment. However, as the enemy continued to shell and send out patrols

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these restrictions were gradually lifted. From the winter of 1951-52 until the end of hostilities, a period of static warfare set in. It became a war of raids and counter-raids, booby traps and mines, bombardments, casualties and endless patrolling.

As the fighting dragged on into 1953 under the name of the "Twilight War", defences on both sides grew stronger and deeper. Canadians engaged in patrolling and ambush with the object of dominating "No Man's Land" and securing prisoners. Early in May the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment withstood a strong enemy assault on its position about Hill 187. The attack was repulsed, but the engagement cost the Canadians heavy casualties - 26 killed, 27 wounded and 7 taken prisoner.

Fighting in Korea finally came to an end when the Korea Armistice Agreement was signed at Panmunjom on 27 July 1953. It must be appreciated that every phase of the Korean campaign was a combined operation in which United Nations forces on the sea and in the air played a prominent and vital role. Without naval supremacy and air power the land campaign would have been virtually impossible.

The fact that Korea is a peninsula offered unusual scope for naval support. In providing that support a total of 8 ships of the RCN joined their UN and ROK navy colleagues, performing a great variety of tasks. They maintained a continuous blockade of the enemy coast. They prevented amphibious landings by the enemy and supported the UN land forces by the bombardment of enemy-held coastal areas, and attacks by carrier-borne aircraft. In addition, they protected the friendly islands and brought aid and comfort to the sick and needy of South Korea's isolated fishing villages.

During the 37 months of the Korean War, the RCN led all other UN Naval Force ships in the number of communist trains destroyed. *HMCS Crusader* held the title as the most proficient at 'trainbusting' with four. In all, the RCN managed to 'kill' 8 communist trains.

Throughout the war, 8 RCN destroyers - 4 from Esquimalt and an equal number from Halifax - carried the colours of Canada against the Red Menace in the Far East. *Iroquois*, *Nootka*, *Huron* and *Haida* came from Halifax and *Cayuga*, *Athabaskan*, *Sioux* and *Crusader* from Esquimalt. In all, about 4,000 RCN personnel saw service in Korea.¹⁷



HMCS Crusader¹⁸

One month after the outbreak of war it was confirmed that RCAF 426 Squadron ("Thunderbirds") would deploy to McCord Air Force Base near Tacoma, Washington. From there they would operate as a unit of the USAF Military Air Transport System (MATS). Six

¹⁷ Orrick, Bob, *The Canadian Navy – Ready Aye Ready*, <http://www.senioryears.com/canadanavy.html>

¹⁸ Source: Ready Aye Ready, <http://www.readyayeready.com/ships/shipview.php?id=1112>

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aircraft with 12 crews and 180 support personnel on board proceeded individually to McChord arriving early on 26 July. The operational plan called for one departure every morning. Aircraft would be flown at 150 hours and aircrew at 110 hours per month. Three aircraft departed McChord on 27 July with slip crews and servicing personnel to set up the North Pacific route through Anchorage and Shemya to Haneda AFB at Tokyo. The round trip was 10,000 miles and the flying time was in the order of 50 hours depending on the weather conditions and winds. Flying operations involved long crew days and particularly challenging weather conditions at the terminals along the Aleutian chain of islands where high winds and low clouds or fog were the norm. Many aircrew flew in excess of the planned rate of 110 hours per month and on occasion some individuals exceeded the 200 hour mark.



North Star of 426 Squadron

(Source: http://www.kvacanada.com/cdnforces_airforce.htm)

The statistics for the Squadron on the Korean airlift are impressive. In just under four years, 599 round trips were made to the Far East. This entailed a total of 34,000 flying hours without loss of cargo or a single passenger. No one was injured on flight operations which was a miracle when considering the numerous incidents and "near misses".

Twenty-two RCAF fighter pilots and a number of technical officers served with the US Fifth Air Force. The Canadians were credited with 20 enemy jet fighters destroyed or damaged, as well as the destruction of several enemy trains and trucks.¹⁹

In addition, a number of army officers served with United States units as forward air controllers and there were several Canadian naval aviators flying with the United States Navy.

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¹⁹ Grose, Ed, Secretary, 426 "Thunderbird" Squadron Association,
http://www.kvacanada.com/cdnforces_airforce.htm

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Conclusion: Altogether 26,791 Canadians served in the Korean War and another 7,000 served in the theatre between the cease-fire and the end of 1955. United Nations forces (including South Korean) fatal and non-fatal battle casualties numbered about 490,000. Of these 1,558 were Canadian. The names of 516 Canadian war dead are inscribed in the Korea Book of Remembrance.

The truce, which followed the armistice of July 27, 1953, was an uneasy one, yet the UN intervention in Korea had great significance. For the first time in history an international organization had intervened effectively with a multi-power force to stem aggression and the UN emerged from the crisis with enhanced prestige.

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11. Grose, Ed, Secretary, 426 "Thunderbird" Squadron Association, http://www.kvacanada.com/cdnforces_airforce.htm
12. http://www.korean-war-medals.com/canada/medal_2.shtml

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ANNEXES

- A. The Canadian Volunteer Service Medal For Korea
 - B. The Korean War Wall of Remembrance
-

ANNEX A

THE CANADIAN VOLUNTEER SERVICE MEDAL FOR KOREA²⁰



Obverse



Reverse

The establishment of this medal was announced by the Minister of Veterans' Affairs on June 17, 1991 and Queen Elizabeth II approved the creation by Order of Council of June 20, 1991.

²⁰ http://www.korean-war-medals.com/canada/medal_2.shtml

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A former member of the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Army or the Royal Canadian Air Force is eligible to be awarded the medal where the member:

- (a) was in the Canadian armed forces during all or part of the period from June 27, 1950 to July 27, 1954;
- (b) was in the qualifying area (defined as Korea and the adjacent areas, including Japan, Okinawa and Korean waters); and,
- (c) during the period referred to in (a), was on the strength of an army unit or formation in Korea for at least one day; was on active service for at least 28 days on a ship or a craft engaged in operations in the qualifying area; flew one sortie over Korea or over Korean waters in the Yellow Sea or Sea of Japan, or; accumulated at least 28 days service in the qualifying area.

The medal may be awarded posthumously; next of kin can receive the medal on application to the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs.

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ANNEX B

THE KOREAN WAR WALL OF REMEMBRANCE²¹



The Korean Wall of Remembrance is located in Meadowvale Cemetery, in the city of Brampton, Ontario. Completed in 1996, the memorial is a 200 foot long granite wall, dedicated to the memory of the 516 Canadians who lost their lives during the conflict, including the soldiers of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery killed in the Canoe River train crash. The project was built at a cost of \$300,000, which was raised from private and corporate donations. No government funds were used in the project.

Each of the brass plaques on the wall lists the name, rank, unit and date of death of a Canadian involved in the Korean War, and are replicas of those found on the graves of Canadians buried in Pusan, South Korea.

²¹ <http://www.canadianmilitary.page.tl/The-Korean-War.htm>