



CANADA REMEMBERS

The Canadian Armed Forces in the Congo



INTRODUCTION

Imagine travelling far from home to a war-torn country where chaos, violence and weapons are everywhere. Then imagine being a Canadian Armed Forces member there trying to restore peace and freedom. Welcome to the world of peace support operations in the Congo, where more than 2,500 Canadians have served to try to help stabilize and rebuild the country during the course of several military missions from 1960 to today.

THE CONGO

The Congo is a large country in central Africa (almost as large as the provinces of Ontario and Quebec combined) that has a population of more than 70,000,000 people. An ecologically-rich land, it straddles the equator and is home to the second-largest rainforest in the world.

The Congo has had a tumultuous history. Formerly known as the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo, it suffered greatly during its 90-year colonial period. It was ruled by Belgium until 1960 when the country finally gained its independence. The transition from colony to nationhood, however, was far from smooth. The departure of the Belgian administrators left the country in disarray as they had not prepared for the transfer of power to the local people. Political in-fighting, inter-tribal tensions, famine, an army mutiny, international interference and widespread violence ensued, threatening to throw the country into a state of chaos.

CANADA AND THE WORLD RESPOND

Belgium decided to send its troops in to try to restore order and protect Belgian nationals who were still living there. This step was done without the consent of the new country's government, however, which then called on the United Nations (UN) for help in dealing with what it perceived as "external aggression." The UN was concerned by the volatile political situation, social upheaval and starvation in the country. They called on Belgium to leave the Congo and sent in international troops almost immediately. These peacekeepers' initial mission was to ensure that the Belgian troops departed, as well as to help restore order and stability.

It was a major undertaking—violence was rife and the country was so large that a major international intervention would be required to possibly make a difference. Eventually a UN force of more than 20,000 personnel would serve in the Congo (including more than 300 Canadians), plus thousands of civilian foreign aid workers who travelled to the country to provide food and assistance to the suffering people.

Just a few years after their first large-scale peacekeeping effort in response to the Suez Crisis, UN troops soon found themselves exposed to a new type of peace mission where they were authorized to use force in fulfilling their mandate. The mission would prove to be complex and drew the peacekeepers into performing new roles.

A Canadian soldier from the *Royal 22^e Régiment* checking a recoilless rifle during a visit to a Congolese defensive position in 1963.
Photo: Department of National Defence UNCG3-23-9

The main military focus of the mission was to preserve the territorial integrity of the Congo. They were able to prevent break-away portions of the country from seceding and helped push out the foreign mercenaries who were contributing to political instability. In the end, unfortunately, the UN forces were not enough to stop the greater forces of upheaval rocking the Congo and they departed in 1964, ending the initial international military peace effort in the country.

Sadly, the situation in the Congo has remained troubled. The country was renamed Zaire (as it was known between 1964 and 1996) and suffered under a dictatorship for decades. Major unrest would erupt again in the mid-1990s as refugees streamed into the eastern portions of the country following upheavals in the neighbouring countries of Rwanda and Burundi. Canada made an effort to alleviate the growing crisis in 1996 by joining a short-lived multinational force to provide humanitarian aid and help refugees return home. More than 350 Canadians participated in the mission.

A violent coup then occurred in the Congo in 1997, with ethnic strife and civil war engulfing the country. Some reports suggest that up to 3.8 million died in the subsequent violence. The UN again intervened with a military mission in 1999 that continues to this day. Canadian Armed Forces members have been a part of this effort as well, trying to help stabilize the region by flying in supplies and personnel, providing mission staff and supporting humanitarian aid efforts.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- The original peacekeeping mission to the Congo was one of the largest ever undertaken. At times in the early 1960s, there were more than 20,000 UN personnel from 30 countries involved.
- In 1961, UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld died in a suspicious plane crash while in Africa trying to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the crisis.
- Due to the Congo's background as a Belgian colony, French-speaking peacekeepers were at a premium and Francophone Canadian officers held key positions in the UN command.

- The Congo in the 1960s was the first time the UN authorized the use of deadly force other than strictly in self-defence. They would not do so again until the missions in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.
- The current UN effort in the Congo is also a large one, with approximately 18,000 troops taking part.

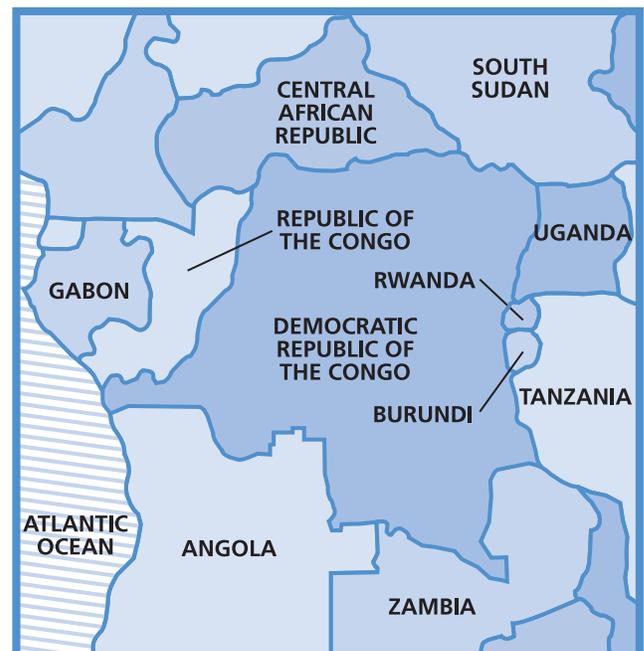
HEROES AND BRAVERY

Lieutenant-Colonel Jean Berthiaume was chief of staff of the UN forces in the Congo during the opening phase of the peacekeeping mission there. In recognition of his impressive efforts, he was named an Officer of the Order of the British Empire – the first Canadian to receive that honour since the Second World War.

Brigadier-General Jacques Dextraze was chief of staff of the UN forces in the Congo from 1963 to 1964. He led a series of missions to rescue groups of non-combatants from combat zones and was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, with oak leaf, for his brave service.

Lieutenant J.F.T.A. Liston of the *Royal 22^e Régiment* was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire for rescuing a wounded person from a minefield.

Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Mayer and Sergeant J.A.L. Lessard received the George Medal for rescuing priests and nuns from a dangerous situation that saw Lessard single-handedly hold off 15 armed enemy soldiers.



SACRIFICE

Serving in international peace support efforts is dangerous duty. Canadian Armed Forces members must enter volatile situations where the risk of personal harm is very real. Hostile fire, landmines and vehicle accidents are perhaps the most obvious dangers in a conflict zone, but they are not the only ones. Serious illnesses and harsh psychological effects resulting from the arduous conditions can take a serious and life-long toll, as well. The military missions in the Congo have been particularly dangerous. Approximately 280 UN peacekeepers have lost their lives there over the years, including two Canadians who paid the ultimate price to help the people in the strife-torn country. In total, there have been about 130 Canadians who have died in service during peacekeeping operations over the years.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations.

To learn more about Canada's role in peace support efforts over the years, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at veterans.gc.ca or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Veterans Affairs Canada: veterans.gc.ca
- Canadian Military History Gateway: www.cmhg.gc.ca
- Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association: www.cpva.ca
- Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping: www.cavunp.org
- The Royal Canadian Legion: www.legion.ca

This publication is available in other formats upon request.

