



CANADA REMEMBERS

The Canadian Armed Forces in Egypt

INTRODUCTION

When most Canadians think of Egypt, the beauty of the Nile River and the great pyramids might be some of the first things that come to mind. However, for thousands of Canadian Armed Forces members who served there over the last 50 years, a different image could come to mind – one of conflict between two clashing countries with nothing separating them except the peace efforts of Canada and other concerned countries.

Canadian Armed Forces members took part in the United Nations (UN) peace missions in the Gaza strip and the Sinai peninsula of Egypt between 1956 and 1967, and again from 1973 to 1979. Since 1986, Canadians have also participated in the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) peace mission in Egypt.

These missions have touched the lives of many Canadian families and communities as tens of thousands of Canadians have left for Egypt over the years to return with a new sense of military conflict and strife and a deeper appreciation for how complicated the concept of peace can be.

EGYPT

Egypt is a desert nation in the Middle East, strategically located to form the only link between the two huge continents of Africa and Asia. Egypt is home to the Suez Canal, a very important waterway which allows ship traffic between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.

While Egypt gained full independence in the years following the Second World War, the Suez Canal remained under the control of British and French interests. In 1956, after years of increasing tensions between Egypt and these European powers, Egypt seized control of the waterway. France, the United Kingdom and Israel were dismayed by this act and decided to act together to forcibly change the situation. Later that year, Israel invaded Egypt and pushed on toward the Suez Canal. The British and French then landed troops of their own along the Canal Zone to secure it.

CANADA AND THE WORLD RESPONDS

Due to this complicated situation and intense unrest, the United Nations immediately met to try to resolve the issue and called for a cease-fire and withdrawal of foreign forces from Egypt. In discussions, Canada's then-Minister of External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, called for the creation of a multinational armed force to go into Egypt to help restore peace and prevent a major international confrontation. The UN members agreed to this plan, which would be monitored and enforced by a UN force under the command of another Canadian, Lieutenant-General E.L.M. "Tommy" Burns. The countries involved in the conflict accepted these terms and the modern era of international peacekeeping was born. It is a source of Canadian pride that Lester B. Pearson (who would go on to become Prime Minister of Canada), was awarded the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize for his work toward establishing this first major UN peacekeeping mission.

Canada participated in this early UN peacekeeping deployment. As dozens of missions followed over the years, the concept of peacekeeping evolved to a peace support force that manages military conflict and civil unrest in a sophisticated, complex, and often dangerous process.

In this first effort, some practical issues had to be resolved for the Canadians' efforts to be effective. They needed a way to distinguish themselves from the British who had been involved in the fighting, and whose uniforms and weapons looked very similar to those used by Canada. It was decided that the UN troops would wear blue headgear to be easily identifiable as being there for a peaceful purpose and not as combatants. The blue berets and helmets worn by UN peacekeepers have become one of the most well known symbols of today's international peace support movement.

The UN initiative was initially a success, with Britain and France withdrawing their troops by the end of the year and Israel withdrawing by March 1957. UN observers remained in the border area between Israel and Egypt to monitor the situation until tensions heightened again in 1967 in the lead-up to the Six-Day War and demands by Egypt for a departure of the peace forces stationed on their soil.

Following the Yom Kippur War of 1973, where Egypt and Syria attacked Israeli forces, the UN was again called in to maintain peace in the region which they did until the Camp David Accords. This created the framework for a lasting peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, and the UN mission came to an end in 1979.

In 1986, the Canadian Armed Forces would return to Egypt as part of the non-UN-administered MFO peace presence that had been put in place in 1982 to support the terms of this peace treaty.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- In all its missions to Egypt, Canada's main contribution was logistical in nature, providing services like transportation, communication, supply and health support for the UN forces.
- At times, the total size of the UN peace forces in Egypt was upward of 7,000 troops drawn from 20 countries. More than 150 UN troops died in their peace efforts for Egypt, including more than 50 Canadians. This was the largest loss of life in any single Canadian peace effort.

HEROES AND BRAVERY

For our Canadian Armed Forces members, there is more to peace efforts than the traditional skills of the military. For example, once active fighting in Egypt came to an end, the peacekeepers came in and the Israelis and Egyptians had to co-exist under terms of the cease-fire. Much of the job of the local commanders of the UN mission (which included Canadian officers like Bill Porter and Ken Nette) following the end of the Yom Kippur War in 1973 was diplomatic in nature. They had to broker countless small but delicate negotiations involving matters like prisoner exchanges and recovery of war dead.

Heroes who showed bravery and skill during missions like these can be found in almost every community across Canada. But when they return to their home communities, their experiences are often not well understood. That's because many members of the Canadian Armed Forces find it hard to talk about the military and civil conflict and strife they have lived through, or reveal how hard it is to leave behind loved ones for months at a time.



But peace efforts can have positive impacts on those who participate in them. For example, Canadians on many of these missions are exposed to many different cultures, including the one that exists in the place they are stationed and that of their fellow troops from all over the world. Canadians in the MFO mission take the opportunity to learn about the cultural identity and history of the Middle East, a knowledge that can only help them better understand our own culturally-diverse country of Canada.

SACRIFICE

On the edge of the town of Gaza lies a well-tended cemetery filled with the graves of Allied troops who died while serving in the Middle East during the First World War. One small corner of this cemetery, reached through gates adorned with gilded maple leaves, is home to the graves of 22 Canadians who died in the course of the peace efforts to Egypt in the 1950s and '60s.

The Canadians who are buried there died as a result of perils like ambush, land mine explosions and vehicle accidents. These represent only some of the dangers that must be faced during peace efforts. Even today, the grim legacy of war lives on in Egypt, where the peril of land mines is an ongoing danger for its citizens and for the troops maintaining the peace.

The Canadian Armed Forces members who lay buried next to those who served their countries and the world in the First World War, their sacrifices equal in death, are remembered by Canadians around the world. About 130 Canadians have died in the course of peace support operations overseas over the years, paying the ultimate price in their efforts to help the people in these strife-torn places. Many more have been injured in these efforts.

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

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