

Canadian Forces in Syria

Being far from home and family is never easy, especially if your work takes you to a harsh and isolated part of the world where you must carry out your duties surrounded by barbed wire, trenches, and the wreckage of past conflicts between two bitter foes that could explode into flashes of violence. For the many Canadian Forces members who have served in the United Nations (UN) peace mission in the Golan Heights of Syria, this is not a hypothetical scenario. It is real – and they lived it.

The Canadian presence in the uplands between Syria and Israel is one of the longest-running international commitments ever undertaken by Canada. More than 12,000 Canadians have served there since the UN peace mission began in 1974.

Many Canadians have enjoyed peace for so long that it might be difficult to imagine its absence; but those who served in Syria deeply understand how fragile peace is, and how important it is to protect.

Syria

Syria is a small Arab country with a population of approximately 18 million people. It is located in the Middle East along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. Much of Syria's recent history is defined by the tensions and political unrest that have enveloped much of the volatile Middle East for the past half century. From time to time, conflicts between the Arab countries and Israel have broken out, as it did in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 when Syria and Egypt clashed with Israeli forces. It would be the next year before a cease-fire agreement was reached between Syria and Israel.

Canada and the World Responds

The UN was called upon in 1974 to create a mission, known as the United Nations Disengagement Observation Force (UNDOF), to supervise the cease-fire plan and to monitor the situation afterwards.

The plan created a buffer zone between the forces of the two countries. This zone, called an 'Area of Separation', is 80 kilometres long and from one to 10 kilometres wide. It is mostly located in the area known as the Golan Heights. Inside this special area, no military presence is allowed other than UN observers. Beyond this zone there is an 'Area of Limitation' where there are restrictions upon any military presence and the activity of Israeli and Syrian forces.

The Canadians' primary role in Syria is to provide transportation, supply, maintenance, communications and other logistical support services for their fellow UN forces. Without these essential services, the larger UN peace forces could not continue their patrols and other vital activities that help stabilize the area.

Facts and Figures

- The Golan Heights is a dry, inhospitable area where poisonous snakes and other natural threats are common. In places, the temperatures can reach 40 C in the summer and the weather can turn cold, wet and snowy in the winter.
- The UN peace contingent in the Golan Heights has numbered more than 1,000 personnel strong, with tens of thousands of UN troops serving in the area over the years. In total, approximately 40 UN personnel have died in the course of peace efforts there, including four Canadians.

Heroes and Bravery

The challenges of peace missions are varied. In 1984, a Canadian, Lieutenant-Colonel Donald Ethell, was acting as the Force Commander in the area when he made the delicate last-minute arrangements for a large prisoner and body exchange between Israel and Syria. The situation was tense and violence was a distinct possibility, but Lt.-Col. Ethell was able to complete the exchange which involved more than 300 prisoners of war and soldier remains. A year later he successfully arranged a similar exchange of approximately 150 prisoners.

During the Gulf War of 1991, the UN forces stationed in the Golan Heights were on high alert. Scud missiles launched from Iraq and targeted on Israel would fly overhead on an almost nightly basis for a time. For the Canadians stationed in occupied Syria, this was a time of constant tension and sleepless nights as the perils of war again came calling on the Golan Heights.

Canadian Forces members serving in distant, dangerous places have found ways to cope. In the Golan Heights, for example, the Canadian contingent has a mascot. Digger is a dog who lives with the Maintenance Platoon and holds an honorary rank of sergeant. He has been with the contingent for more than 20 tours and even had his picture taken with the then-Prime Minister of Canada, Jean Chrétien, when he visited the troops.

Sacrifice

The presence of UN troops in the Golan Heights has helped to prevent the outbreak of new full-fledged hostilities between Israel and Syria. However, this has come with a high price.

The single highest loss of Canadian lives since our country began to participate in international peace missions involved our presence in Syria. Nine Canadian Forces members with the UN peace mission in Egypt were killed on August 9, 1974 when the plane they were in was shot down in a Syrian missile attack while making a routine supply run to the mission in the Golan Heights.

Hostile fire, landmines and vehicle accidents are the most obvious dangers in a conflict zone, but they are not the only ones. Mysterious illnesses and psychological effects resulting from the harsh conditions take a serious toll that can last a lifetime.

Building a solid foundation for lasting peace in a region torn by years of strife can be a lengthy process. Because rotations are usually six months at a time, the Canadians serving there often do not get to see the full effects of their labours to support peace. Because of the nature of peace work, it sometimes takes years for the results of their work to be seen and understood. This can add to the stress that Canadian Forces members feel when they return home and, when they leave the Forces, it can make it more difficult for them to reintegrate into civilian life.

All those who serve in peace efforts take their place of honour alongside Canadian veterans who achieved and sacrificed so much in the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War.

Canada Remembers Program

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