

THE CANADIAN FORCES IN ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA

Canadian Forces members served in Ethiopia and Eritrea from 2000 to 2003, taking part in the United Nations (UN) peace mission there. There were times when more than 500 Canadians served in the hot, dusty, far-off region as part of the larger international effort.

ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA

Ethiopia and Eritrea are two neighbouring nations in the Horn of Africa, in the easternmost corner of the continent. This region of Africa has endured major problems over the years with both drought and strife often making life for the inhabitants very difficult.

Ethiopia is the oldest independent nation in Africa. This large, ethnically-diverse country has an area of more than 1.1 million square kilometres (making it about the size of the Northwest Territories) and a population of more than 65 million people. Eritrea is a small, largely-rural country just north of Ethiopia that sits along the shore of the Red Sea. It has an area of a little over 120,000 square kilometres (making it about twice the size of Nova Scotia) and a population of more than four million people.

In the years following the Second World War, Ethiopia and Eritrea were part of a political federation but many in Eritrea wanted independence and periodically revolted, resulting in decades of violence. Ethiopia, after a major civil war, finally dropped its claims to Eritrea in the early 1990s and Eritrea became independent in 1993. This step did not end the unrest, however, and arguments between the two countries over the exact border between them (which had not been very clearly defined) caused major friction.

In 1998, clashes broke out again, with Ethiopia and Eritrea building up hundreds of thousands of troops along their shared border. By the next year they were locked in fierce fighting which degenerated into trench warfare, reminiscent of the First World War. More than 100,000 soldiers and civilians would die and 650,000 people become refugees in the region by the time a cease-fire was declared in 2000. By the end of that year, a peace agreement had been reached and the UN agreed to send in peacekeepers.

CANADA AND THE WORLD RESPONDS

The UN peace effort undertaken in the border region of Ethiopia and Eritrea was established to monitor the terms of the peace treaty and ensure the 25 kilometre-wide 'temporary security zone' that has been established between the two countries is maintained until a final border is agreed upon, working closely with both sides to promote peace, trust and security.

Canada's contribution to the peace efforts in Ethiopia and Eritrea came at the beginning of the UN mission. In late 2000, a 450-strong Canadian Forces contingent made a six-month commitment to help establish the international effort in the region. This Canadian presence included armoured reconnaissance, mechanized infantry, an engineer troop, and support elements.

The Canadians were part of the first battalion to become fully operational in the UN mission there. Canadian soldiers established checkpoints and bases for patrol and monitoring operations in important sectors in the region in an effort to ensure that the required troop pull-outs occurred. The first task was to ensure the two sides withdrew from the disputed area in order to create the

temporary security zone – a process that took three months. Mounted on their Coyote light armoured vehicles, the Canadian troops were able to confront the forces of both sides who were raiding abandoned villages in the security zone for supplies to build new fortifications and to enforce the terms of the peace treaty. Once the opposing forces withdrew to the agreed positions and the temporary security zone was successfully established in April 2001, the Canadians continued to monitor the Eritrean and Ethiopian presence in the area. The bulk of the Canadians, their six-month deployment over, began to return home in June.

In addition to this larger force, six Canadian Forces members worked as part of an international group of approximately 220 UN Military Observers who monitored the security zone between the two countries, ensuring compliance with the peace treaty, and interacting with the forces of both sides to gain acceptance of the UN presence. These observers also spoke with local people to gather information and to determine their humanitarian needs. This Canadian presence continued until July 2003.

The border situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea is still unresolved and tensions remain. However, the continuing presence of the international peacekeepers has helped ensure that no renewed, large-scale fighting between the nations has erupted in recent years.

FACTS AND FIGURES

The Canadian contingent deployed with those of the Netherlands and Denmark as part of the UN's Standby

High-Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG), a multinational rapid-deployment force intended to respond quickly to problems that arise in trouble spots around the globe. This force is designed to deploy for six months in order to allow a follow-up UN mission to be organized.

At times, the contingent size of UN peacekeepers serving in Ethiopia and Eritrea has numbered more than 4,000 military personnel and 450 civilians from more than 40 countries.

HEROES AND BRAVERY

Canadian soldiers endure many hardships while on peacekeeping duties. In Ethiopia and Eritrea, the temperatures often reached 50 degrees during the day. Without any breeze at night, the high humidity made sleeping difficult. Flies were everywhere, invading food, tents and vehicles. The long drought in the area also created a fine powder-like dust that coated the soldiers.

While there is certainly a political aspect to peace missions, the Canadian Forces members who participate in these efforts often go beyond the strict definitions of their duties to help those in need. In Ethiopia and Eritrea, Canadians volunteered their resources and skills to work with the local people of an Eritrean town to rebuild a damaged school. These humanitarian efforts in the region – largely conceived and paid for by the Canadian Forces members themselves – included distributing clothes, school supplies, sports equipment, and toys to the children in the area they were stationed.



SACRIFICE

Armed conflict brings suffering to all those involved, whether it is to those involved in the fighting, the civilians caught in the midst of the hostilities or those who must try to return stability to a region torn apart by violence. Canadian Forces members know well the sacrifices that go along with the rewards of participating in international peace support efforts.

Those who serve in peace support efforts must enter into volatile situations where the risk of personal harm is very real. Hostile fire and landmines (which damaged some Canadian vehicles during this mission) are perhaps the most obvious dangers in a conflict zone, but they are not the only ones. Vehicle accidents, mysterious illnesses, and psychological effects resulting from the arduous conditions that these people are exposed to take a serious toll as well – a toll that can continue for many years. While no Canadian Forces members lost their lives in Ethiopia and Eritrea, 10 UN personnel from six different countries died in the course of the international peace effort in this very hot and arid region. However, approximately 125 Canadian personnel have died in the course of other peace support efforts.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by Canada's Veterans during times of war, military conflict, and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will

help to preserve their legacy for future generations of Canadians. Knowing about our country's values and history helps us understand the Canada we live in today and how we can build our future together.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Veterans Affairs Canada:
www.vac-acc.gc.ca
- Canadian Military History Gateway:
www.cmhg.gc.ca
- United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea:
www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unmee
- 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

