



# CANADA REMEMBERS

## The Canadian Armed Forces in Somalia



### INTRODUCTION

Canada has long participated in international peace efforts, but the nature of these missions is far from simple. The Canadian men and women who find themselves on the ground in far-off countries in turmoil often must deal with a great deal of hostility and resistance from the citizens they are trying to help in the course of their duties.

One of the countries which would prove to be especially challenging for peace support personnel was Somalia. Canadian Armed Forces members served in Somalia from 1992 to 1993. They took part in United Nations (UN) peace missions and a United States-led multinational peace support operation. The controversy that would come to surround Canada's efforts in the country has made the name Somalia a sensitive one for many.

### SOMALIA

Somalia is a large country in the Horn of Africa. It is spread out along the Indian Ocean at the most eastern corner of the continent. The hot and arid country, straddling the equator, has a land mass of more than 600,000 square kilometres, making it roughly the size of Saskatchewan. Most of Somalia's eight million people are very poor.

The areas that would come together to become Somalia were once colonies of Europe. After the Second World

War, they began moving down the path toward independence, becoming one nation in 1960.

The country's society is tribal-based, with strong clan ties having a great influence on the politics of the country. The years following independence were difficult for the people of Somalia. They lived with internal and international tensions, uprisings and drought. In the early 1990s, widespread civil war and famine engulfed the entire country. Hundreds of thousands died in the upheavals. The country became dominated by the activities of rival clans and local warlords with their brutal militias who spread terror and prevented any semblance of normal life.

### THE WORLD RESPONDS

In 1992, the international community took action. The UN formed a peacekeeping mission to help bring stability to the region and allow relief supplies to reach those in desperate need of it. A further United States-led multinational initiative was authorized by the UN in late 1992. Canada, along with more than 20 other nations, participated in this as well. During their time in Somalia, Canadians did many things to try to improve the desperate situation there. They escorted famine relief convoys, participated in the removal of land mines and collected or destroyed thousands of confiscated weapons. Despite their best efforts, the international forces could not end the strife in the country. In 1995, the final UN peace support mission withdrew.

Canada's mission in Somalia was clouded by controversial incidents involving the Canadian Airborne Regiment and the death of a young Somali intruder in the Canadian camp near the town of Belet Uen. A high-profile Canadian military inquiry would follow and the Airborne Division would eventually be disbanded.

Today, Somalia remains one of the world's poorest and least-developed countries. There is no real country-wide government. Local strongmen retain control of large areas of the region. Portions of the country have tried to break away and form their own nations. Somalia's infrastructure is in shambles and famine remains a problem. Many of its people rely on foreign aid to survive.

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- An estimated 300,000 Somalis died in the upheaval. Perhaps a million were forced to become refugees in neighbouring countries or within Somalia itself.
- Approximately 28,000 UN troops were deployed to Somalia in the early 1990s. More than 150 UN personnel died there in the course of international peacekeeping efforts.
- The UN authorized the creation of the United Task Force (UNITAF), a U.S.-led multinational force that had a troop strength of almost 40,000, with personnel from over 20 countries. Canada's contribution to this mission was upward of 1,400 military personnel.
- Somalia was a harsh and unforgiving place for

Canadian Armed Forces members – dry and dusty with temperatures over 50 degrees Celsius not being uncommon. Yellow fever and malaria, as well as venomous scorpions and snakes are commonplace there, adding to the risks.

## HEROES AND BRAVERY

Canadian Armed Forces members in Somalia faced much violence and chaos. Peace support forces often faced great danger with even greater acts of valour.

Canada's Sea King helicopter crews took part in reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering activities, frequently coming under fire while doing so. They performed many medical evacuations (being dubbed "the body snatchers" by the American forces who were also operating in the area) and performed airborne transport of cargo and personnel from the HMCS *Preserver* off the coast.

Canadian soldiers came under fire several times in Somalia. On June 18, 1993, Warrant Officer Roch Lanteigne risked his life supplying ammunition to members of his platoon who were defending the new harbour facilities in Mogadishu, the country's capital. Under fire, he went from bunker to bunker three times to deliver ammunition to his platoon, only returning to safety when all the soldiers were re-supplied.

Naval Lieutenant Heather MacKinnon did much to help the people of Somalia during the UN operations there. She operated a medical clinic and worked in hospitals and orphanages to help the victims of war and famine in Mogadishu, despite the continual risks of working in a war zone.



## SACRIFICE

The peace support missions in Somalia were particularly difficult ones for the Canadian Armed Forces members serving on them as, in the end, they could only have a limited impact on the greater forces swirling around them. Somalia was a lawless war zone and peace support troops had to engage in firefights to try to fulfill some of its missions. The risks of serving in areas like Somalia are many – from hostile fire, land mines and driving accidents to exotic diseases, poisonous wildlife and the harsh and long-lasting psychological effects of serving under such arduous conditions. During the peace efforts in Somalia, one Canadian Armed Forces member lost his life.

Canada's sacrifices on the battlefields of the First World War, Second World War and Korean War during the first half of the 20th century left our nation with a hard-earned resolve to be a power for peace in the world. Today, the Canadian Armed Forces proudly carry on the tradition set many years ago by the Veterans of Canada's efforts in these great conflicts. Our country's willingness to contribute to international peace efforts and the willingness of our military personnel to put themselves in harm's way for the benefit of others has been integral to many international peace support efforts. Indeed it is one of our defining qualities in the eyes of 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.

DND Photo/Somalia

## 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](http://veterans.gc.ca) or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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

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