

# Canadian Vietnam Veterans



## Canadians in the Vietnam War



Mural dedicated to Canadians in Vietnam by Dan Lessard

*"These men fought gallantly and served my country in the highest tradition of the United States Naval Service. They replaced American draft dodgers and deserters on the battlefield. I have nothing but respect and admiration for these men." Patrick Luongo, U.S. Marine Corps Vietnam Veteran*

Canada became officially involved in the Vietnam conflict in 1954, as part of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam. The role of the Canadians, along with personnel from Poland and India, enforced the Geneva Convention accords, supervised cease-fires, and monitored the movement of refugees.

However, the Canadian role was one of peacekeeping, and we were not considered to be a "belligerent" nation people are unaware of the Canadian Vietnam veterans existence.

During the Vietnam War, Canada gained more of a reputation as a haven for draft dodgers and deserters than it did as a source of volunteers.

It is estimated that 150,000 Americans fled to Canada during the war, in order to avoid military service. In addition, many deserters from the U.S. military made their way to Canada, hoping to find safe haven from military justice one

U.S. Marine said, commenting on the draft dodgers and the Canadians volunteering to fight with the Americans, "*the worst of ours are going north, and the best of theirs are coming south*". Some estimates claim between 20,000 and 30,000 Canadians volunteered for service within the branches of the United States military... serving in the army, navy, air force and marines. Of this number, it is believed approximately 12,000 Canadians actually went to Vietnam. A Canadian government official states that, he believes, less than 5,000 Canadians served in Vietnam. The true number of those who served may never actually be known. Many crossed at border cities, and listed that town as their place of residence. Others had dual citizenship, and were enlisted as "Americans", while more were already members of the U.S. military prior to the outbreak of the war.

### **Why They Served**

Much like the U.S. Civil War a hundred years earlier, there were a number of reasons Canadians served with American forces in the conflict. Many of the Canadians who enlisted were in their early twenties, or late teens, and seeking adventure. Some joined out of a belief to fight communism, or for other political reasons. Others still hoped joining the military might provide them with a trade or other job skills. Some were unable to pass the enlistment standards of the Canadian Armed Forces, but were accepted by the Americans. Some members of the Canadian Forces even enlisted with American units, in order to go to Vietnam. Many simply wanted to experience honour and glory. Arthur Diabo, a Mohawk from Quebec, says, "You're young and strong and you want to use that energy. And Vietnam was a good place to do that for about two weeks. After that, you just tried to stay alive."

The American government did not openly recruit on Canadian soil, but it did facilitate the enlistment of Canadians. Recruiting offices were set up in border states, such as Washington and New York. A large number of Montrealers enlisted at the recruiting office in Plattsburgh, New York. Documents were provided to the Canadians that allowed them to receive residency visas from US immigration. One Canadian, Toronto born Peter Lemon, was awarded the medal of honour. The only Canadian to receive this medal during the war, Lemon earned it for his actions during an attack on his base in April 1970. By the end of the Vietnam War, 110 Canadians were listed as killed, and another 7 were listed as missing in action.

### **Canada's Vietnam Veterans**

Following the war, Canadian veterans experienced much of the same hostilities from their own government as the Americans.

The Canadian government refused to recognize their service, and the Royal Canadian Legion denied Vietnam veterans membership.

They were also prohibited from participating in Remembrance Day celebrations, which only recognize combatants in wars, which Canada

participated in. Upon arriving home, many were the target of anti-war protestors.

The families of those killed in Vietnam were also the victim of hostilities, and the veterans suffered many of the same physical and mental conditions as their American brothers.



**The Canadian Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall,  
photo courtesy of Jon Adaskin**

*"There'll be words spoken in the cold November air about our brave soldiers who fought and died in World War I and World War II and the Korean War, but there will be no words spoken about the long and terrible and bloody conflict known as the Vietnam War..... Canada is not honouring, and has not respected, the thousands of young Canadians who crossed the border to sign up for the Vietnam War wearing the uniform of the United States of America."-*

**Earl McRea, the Ottawa Sun, November 11, 2005**

**As if to add insult to injury, the town of Nelson, British Columbia, had planned to build a memorial dedicated to the draft dodgers from the U.S. who fled to Canada. This memorial would also salute those Canadians who assisted them in settling here.**

Thankfully, this idea was scrapped, and the project never saw the light of day. Municipal politicians, in reversing the decision, declared such a monument would be "a misuse of public funds".

**Finally, in 2005, the Canadian government officially recognized Canada's Vietnam Veterans. Recognition of these veterans has also been instituted**

at some Remembrance Day ceremonies, and a permanent display will be erected at Canada's War Museum.

### **Canadians Missing in Action**

The U.S. Department of Defense has three categories for missing personnel: missing in action (MIA), prisoners of war (POW) and killed in action, body recovered or body not recovered (KIA/BR, KIA/BNR). The field commander makes the decision which determination will be used. As stated above, seven Canadians are classed as missing in action.

Warrant Officer Ian McIntosh, U.S. Army, was in a helicopter struck by ground fire on November 24, 1970.

Lance Corporal John Reeves, United States Marine Corps, and a native of Winnipeg, was considered non-recoverable. He was swept away by a strong current while crossing a stream in December, 1966.

### **The North Wall**

Located in Assumption Park, in Windsor, Ontario, is a memorial known as "The North Wall". Facing the Detroit River, the wall honours the 103 Canadians who were killed in Vietnam, as well as the 7 who are missing in action. The monument is made of black granite, and measures eleven feet tall by fourteen feet wide. The wall was the work of three American Vietnam veterans from Michigan, who wanted to honour the Canadians who fought alongside them.

**Up until 2005, the federal government of Canada refused to recognize the service of our Vietnam veterans.**

In 1995, the fund raising for the wall was accomplished by the veterans from Michigan, who felt their Canadian brothers should be honoured. The city of Windsor, and the mayor at the time, were in full support of the project.

At the base of the memorial, there is an enshrined Purple Heart, which belonged to Corporal Larry Semeniuk, of Windsor, who served with the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne. The inscription below the Purple Heart reads:

*"Here within this memorial is a symbol that America's first President George Washington Fostered. 'The Purple Heart Medal.' Whether they wore the Maple Leaf of Canada or the Stars and Stripes of the United States, these memorialized veterans are heroes believing that freedom knows no borders, and must be defended whenever it is challenged."*



SOURCE: CANADIANS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

**Canadians and Americans do not realize that while Canada was not officially involved in the war some of our men and women were. There were hundreds of companies who benefited from the war by supplying the American military with supplies.**

**Which in turn employed thousands of Canadians.**

During the **Vietnam Era an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 Canadians** served in the American forces, not all went to Vietnam.

**Senator Edward Kennedy on Jan 17, 1994 read to the U.S. Congressional Record that 40,000 Canadians went to Vietnam.**

Why would Canadians go and fight in a war that was not theirs. The reasons vary as do the men/women.

- 1) They were working in the U.S. on a green card and were drafted.
- 2) Their families moved to U.S. and they got drafted.
- 3) They were going to school and just got out and got drafted.
- 4) They got in trouble and the court system said jail or no record if they joined the services.
- 5) They believed they were fighting for the right reasons - freedom. (Remember that most were raised by watching John Wayne and Roy Rogers - white hat vs black hat, good vs evil).
- 6) They wanted to be a Marine or they could not get into the Canadian Forces.

Canadian Vietnam Veterans like their American Vietnam Veterans had to readjust to the civilian life. Finding employment and trying to fit back in with their families and friends.

**They were treated with contempt and were called mercenaries. Because of their ill treatment a lot of them hid their war time service for fear of negative treatment.**

**When they came home the Canadian Vietnam Veterans were not even recognized as veterans in Canada by their country or by other Canadian**

**Veteran groups.**

**(In recent years they were allowed to join the Royal Canadian Legion as full Members.)**

The Canadian Vietnam Veterans suffer from the effects of Vietnam like their American brothers:

PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder),  
Agent Orange,  
Flash Backs,  
And Depression.

In the early years and for many years after, to get any help they had to cross the border to the States to receive any treatment.

Now in Canada we have VVA representatives, PTSD councilors and support groups.

Please remember our Canadian Vietnam Veterans

~Written by: Maddy Laffin~ Veterans

