IN DEPTH
Canada's Military

The history of Canadian peacekeeping

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The seeds of peacekeeping can be found buried on the battlefields, in the trenches and in the graveyards of Europe and Asia. The men who fought and lived through two world wars never wanted to see another. They believed that by putting an end to regional conflicts they could reduce the potential of the world ever being consumed by war again. They would create a new international body to keep peace in the world and support social and economic progress.

The newly formed United Nations seemed the perfect place to put such lofty ideals into practice; an organization founded on the principle of discussing and mediating ideological and political differences.

(Courtesy UN)

The first United Nations peacekeeping mission was in 1948. Its objective was to supervise the cease-fire between Israel and her Arab neighbours after the War of Independence. Monitors were sent to supervise the truce.

But the first peacekeeping force wasn't established until 1956, a time filled with fears of another global conflict erupting. And once again the backdrop was the Middle East.

In the midst of summer, Egyptian President Gamal Abdal Nasser declared he was nationalizing the Suez Canal, cutting out the Anglo-French company that held controlling interest in the vital waterway that joins the Mediterranean to the Red Sea.

Nasser told a cheering crowd that the imperialists could "choke on their rage." From that point on, ships wishing to use the canal would pay a toll and that money would go toward financing the building of the Aswan High Dam on the Nile.

France and Britain were worried about Nasser's future plans to control such a strategically important waterway. They were also worried about what amounted to a direct challenge from Egypt to their trading interests. Secret plans were made for Israel to attack Egypt. France and Britain would send troops to protect the canal.

In October fighting erupted. On one side the Egyptians; on the other, Britain, France and Israel. Once again it looked as if the major military powers of the world would be drawn into battle. Would the Soviet Union come to Egypt's aid? Would the United States become involved in order to keep the Suez open? The world braced for another deadly meeting of the world's military powers.

But it was not to be. A former diplomat, relatively unknown on the world stage, now Canada's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, had a proposal. He argued that a force sponsored by the UN, made up of soldiers from non-combatant countries, could separate the warring armies and supervise the cease-fire.

(Courtesy UN)

The UN General Assembly accepted his proposal, as did the various belligerents. Canadian General E.M.L. Burns was named commander of the UN force and peacekeeping was born.

Although the "Suez Crisis" remains a vivid reminder of how seemingly regional issues can threaten to draw much larger nations into conflict, it is equally important to applaud the political and diplomatic courage shown by UN members who agreed on an untried and untested idea -- peacekeeping.

For his vision of a world where countries would enter a conflict in order to bring stability and peace, Lester Pearson would receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Since then Canada has been at the forefront of peacekeeping operations around the world. Soldiers, police and civilians have all played prominent roles in separating armies and in the resolution of conflicts in Cyprus, the Middle East, Haiti, Bosnia, Cambodia, El Salvador and Angola to name a few. Currently Canadian peacekeepers are serving in 14 operations in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East.

(Courtesy UN)

But Canada's involvement in so many trouble spots has not come without a price. More than 100 Canadians have been killed while on peacekeeping duties around the world.

And operations in both Somalia and Rwanda led to a crisis of confidence in the Canadian military.

Canada's armed forces have undergone dramatic change over the years since Pearson proposed that first peacekeeping effort in the Middle East. Canadian soldiers now find themselves more likely to be disarming combatants than fighting battles.

The job they will most likely face now is protecting civilian populations, organizing elections and guarding humanitarian convoys. The military has also set up a Rapid Response Force to fly to the scene of natural disasters. Its first deployment came in 1998 when Hurricane Mitch ravaged Central America. Canadian soldiers and medical staff rushed to provide medical and humanitarian relief.

(Courtesy UN)

Arguments exist for the end to UN peacekeeping operations: too costly, too ineffective, a hindrance to the development of a stable, lasting peace negotiated by politicians and diplomats. But in the near future it seems unlikely the UN will abandon what has become its most highly respected international symbol. The blue helmets of the peacekeepers are likely to remain as a buffer between the world's warring factions.