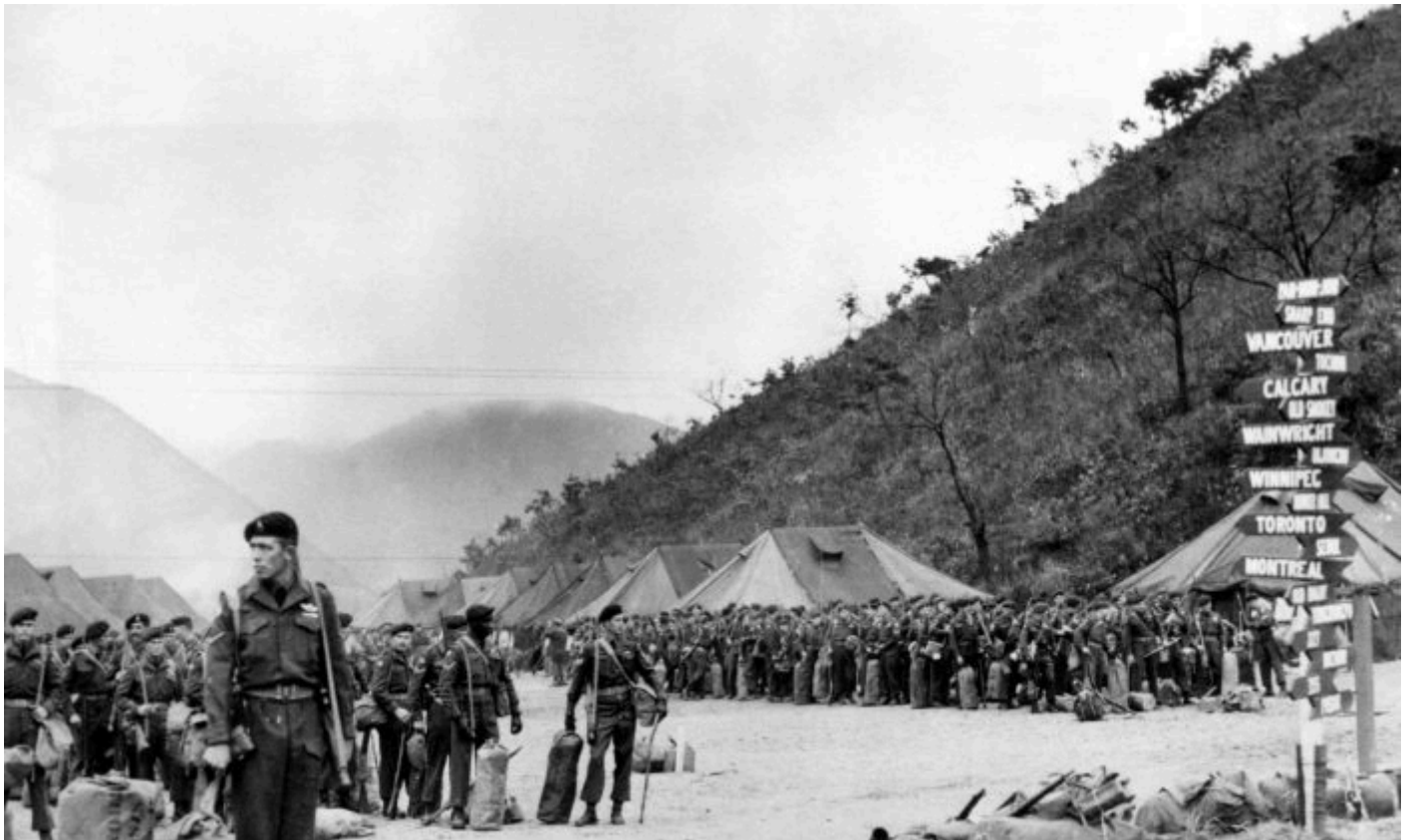


Korea: The ‘Forgotten War’ That Canadians Actually Do Remember

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Members of the First Battalion of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry line up with their gear as they wait to head home after the Korean War ended. The signpost on the right points to major Canadian cities and military positions in Korea. AP



By C.P. Champion

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Commentary

Korea is called Canada's "[forgotten war](#)," though it is recalled at every Remembrance Day ceremony that I have been to since I was in elementary school in the 1970s.

Koreans remember it too. South Korea marks Korean War Day every June 25, the date in 1950 when the North Korean communists, after obtaining approval from Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, [invaded South Korea](#) across the 38th parallel in an attempt to reunify the country by conquest. Communist China (on a roll, having conquered mainland China less than two years earlier) joined on the side of the north in the spring of 1951. And the Koreans well remember how many countries—the United States, Britain, Canada, Turkey, Australia, and many more—came to their rescue to fight the communists to a standstill in 1953.

Ottawa, though, when first asked to contribute, hesitated. Canada had very significant military forces in 1945, but within five years the government, under the great temporizers Mackenzie King and Louis St-Laurent, had already weakened the armed services so much that they could offer only a few ships. Historian Jack Granatstein [observed in The Dorchester Review](#) that it was only after pressure from the United States that Ottawa agreed "to recruit a brigade for the conflict."

Troops from the full-time regular force were the first to go over, with the 2nd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, commanded by World War II veteran Lt. Col. Jim Stone as part of 27th British Commonwealth Infantry Brigade, first in the field. Many believe [wrongly](#) that the Canadians were directly under United Nations command; in fact they [served](#) in the Commonwealth Division, for operational purposes, under HQ 1st U.S. Corps.

What's more, the PPCLI, also called "the Patricias" but known outside the regiment as "Princess Pats," "Pip-Pips," or "Picklies," were expecting to get more training and acclimatization in Korea before they got into the fight.

Then, from April 23–25, 1951, the Patricias had to fight Canada's best-known engagement of the war, the [Battle of Kapyong](#). About 700 2PPCLI troops heroically held a defensive hilltop position on Hill 677, alongside the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment and

gunners of the New Zealand Royal Regiment of Artillery, from an attack by 5,000 Chinese troops. Lt. Col. Stone said his men were “fit, morale high,” and “show[ed] lots of guts in close contact.” Ten Canadians were killed and 23 wounded, compared to about 2,000 Chinese losses. But the free Korean capital, Seoul, was saved, and in conjunction with allied valour all along the wider front, the north’s offensive was stalled.

After that, most of the action Canadians saw occurred in a small area north of Seoul—mostly patrols: small groups of soldiers, with faces blackened, creeping up cautiously on enemy positions, avoiding minefields, to observe, assess, obtain information, and possibly capture Chinese prisoners for questioning. Stumbling on a large enemy force, making “contact” and taking incoming fire, a patrol would beat a hasty retreat through the mud and muck of rice paddies and foliage, then radio in enemy coordinates for artillery support, hoping an allied barrage might stop the enemy advance. Private Doug Carley of the 2nd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment got the Military Medal for doing precisely that on the night of Dec. 13, 1951, near Hill 166.

In November that year, in the face of another bitter “Red Chinese” attack, the Royal 22nd Regiment (the Van Doos), defended Hill 355 (Kowang San), 40 kilometres north of Seoul, alongside the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division. Chinese bombardment and waves of infantry assaults initially pushed the Americans off the summit, and U.S. troops were forced to withdraw through Canadian positions at night.



Republic of Korea Charges d'Affaires Bumsoo Kwak lays a wreath during a ceremony commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Korean War, at the Monument to the Canadian Fallen in Ottawa on June 21, 2020. The Canadian Press/Justin Tang

Lt. Col. Jacques Dextraze, the future general and Chief of the Defence Staff, then in command of the 22nd in their trenches, described the rapid retreat of the Americans. He said their lit cigars resembled slow motion tracer fire moving back as the dug-in Van Doos stayed in position for the next Chinese attack.

The Van Doo defenders bravely withstood wave after wave of assaults, with 16 killed and 44 wounded. One soldier described how his machine gun barrel glowed red as they mowed down countless Chinese attackers. A few days later, the Americans forced the Chinese back and retook Kowang San.

One historical account, **“A War of Patrols”** by **William Johnston**, found that Canada’s “regular battalions” who arrived later, in the spring of 1952, were comparatively not great troops. They were “passive,” poorly led, conducted inadequate patrols, and “did not exhibit the

drive and initiative” that was seen in “the more thorough — and professional — operations of the Special Force.”

That refers to the “Canadian Army Special Force” which the military decided to recruit from experienced war veterans. Ironically, most of them had not been professional soldiers or reservists before the war, but they were hardened veterans and knew what operational soldiering looked like. Johnston says these enthusiastic volunteers, like “Big Jim” Stone himself (he had learned hard lessons in the hills of Sicily and Italy in 1943), did better in Korea than much of the full-time regular force which, due to inactivity and underfunding, can get slack.

When recruiting a commanding officer for the Special Force, the army also went outside the ranks of the regular military to hand-pick a retired soldier, [John M. Rockingham](#), coaxed out of his bus company office at the Pacific Stage Lines in downtown Vancouver, a subsidiary of the British Columbia Electric Railway. Rockingham, known as “Rocky,” was Australian by birth and a Canadian Army veteran who served at Dieppe and Normandy.

To lead what became the 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade, the army tapped Rockingham’s battle and operational experience as well as civilian management ability. He was a soldier’s soldier, extremely popular and effective at the job. After his outstanding Korea service, Rocky remained in the military in the 1950s and ’60s, finally serving as Honorary Colonel of his original reserve regiment, the Canadian Scottish Regiment, today based in Victoria, Nanaimo, and Courtenay, B.C., upon his retirement in 1966.

In Korea, Canada lost 312 killed in action, missing, or presumed dead, plus 143 accidental deaths and 49 losses from illness. There were also eight suicides and four homicides.

To the question, “Was it worth it?” Granatstein’s answer is, “Oh yes.” He explains in his Dorchester Review article: “North Korea, devastated by the war, became a Communist satrapy ruled by the Kim family, a starving militarized state with nuclear weapons. For the North, the war produced nothing but loss and continued slavery. But for South Korea, after many hiccups, it became a democracy with a

growing, prosperous population and a booming industrialized economy.”

One proud Canadian, Hans W. Jung, also knew. Born in Korea five years after the Armistice, he grew up dreaming of faraway Canada whose brave volunteers had no connection to his country but came to Korea’s rescue. In 1970, Hans, age 11, emigrated to Canada with his family, among the first wave of 20,000 Koreans who settled here during the ’70s.

Jung’s [story](#) is inspiring. He studied hard, learned self-discipline from his parents, got into medical school, and joined the Canadian Armed Forces out of a desire to serve. He chose the Royal Canadian Navy and was a medical officer at CFB Esquimalt in Victoria, B.C., and at sea aboard the replenishment ship HMCS Provider. He deployed to the Middle East in the 1990–’91 Gulf War and, returning to Canada, held various postings across the country and at national headquarters. In 2009, with the senior naval rank of commodore, he became Surgeon General of Canada and Commander of Canadian Forces Health Services Group, the country’s top medical officer who is normally the only Canadian appointed by our Sovereign to the Royal Household as Honorary Physician to the King or Queen.

The Korean War is not the forgotten war that people say it is. We remember, every Remembrance Day, that peace and freedom have a high price in blood and treasure. But without a strong military, consistently replenished deterrence, outstanding leadership, professionalism, and a healthy volunteer spirit, there is no path to peace and, alas, war will visit us again.

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C.P. Champion

Author

C.P. Champion, Ph.D., is the author of two books, was a fellow of the Centre for International and Defence Policy at Queen's University in 2021, and edits The Dorchester Review magazine, which he founded in 2011.

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