



Mural dedicated to the Canadians in Vietnam, by Dan Lessard.

## The Canadian Way: The Case of Canadian Vietnam War Veterans

by Ryan Goldsworthy

### Introduction

For Canada, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century was a rather definitive era in shaping the nation's identity in the realm of foreign affairs. Following the Suez Crisis in 1957, Canada's international role shifted from participating in global conflicts as a belligerent to a role that primarily emphasised peacekeeping missions. Simultaneously, Canada also adopted strict non-proliferation and disarmament policies that it maintains to this day.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Canada's single most meaningful foreign affairs decision during this era was its refusal to participate militarily in the Vietnam War. Only a short decade removed from the familiar 'battle against Communism' waged in Korea, Canada, then led by Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, would choose not to support the US and their military exploits in Vietnam. However, Canada's very purposeful lack of official participation in Southeast Asia, and a law making it illegal for Canadians to participate (the 1937 Foreign Enlistment Act),<sup>2</sup> did not prevent up to 40,000 Canadians from enlisting in the US armed forces during this era. That said, none of these Canadians who served in Vietnam were ever prosecuted for violating the Act.<sup>3</sup> The Vietnam War ultimately presents a unique challenge for Canada, as the number of Canadian citizens that participated therein likely represents the highest total in Canadian history for a war where the nation was not officially involved.

When many of these young Canadians who enlisted in the US returned home following their respective tours of duty in the Vietnam era, the public and private reception of their military service was perhaps not what they expected, and certainly not what

many of these veterans had, from their viewpoint, understandably desired.<sup>4</sup> Unlike past Canadian war veterans, even including the 1200 who fought in the Spanish Civil War, Canadian Vietnam War veterans "...never received a 'welcome home' parade or ceremony."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Canadians who served in the Vietnam War, with extra emphasis upon those who died or were killed, seldom have been formally recognized or commemorated in Canada. In fact, only since the mid-1990s have these veterans possessed the basic consent from the Royal Canadian Legion (following decades of refusals and alleged hostility) to seek legion membership and participate in remembrance parades as a unit.<sup>6</sup> The general lack of official commemoration in Canada for Canadians who served in Vietnam has been a contentious and ongoing issue for these veterans, their families, and their organizations. A general outline of the brief historiography and the service of Canadians in Vietnam and the areas in which they have been deprived *official* commemoration and memorialisation is where this brief article now turns.

### A Brief Historiography

Perhaps one of the most telling signs regarding the low level of recognition, and general cognizance, for Canadians who served in Vietnam is the distinct lack of literature dealing with the specific subject matter. The first and seminal volume on the topic is the aptly titled *Unknown Warriors: Canadians in the Vietnam War* (1990) by Fred Gaffen, who has assessed the state of the field and gathered dozens of first-hand accounts from Canadian Vietnam War veterans. Gaffen has succinctly summarized the situation faced by these veterans as follows: "While American Vietnam veterans were not given sufficient recognition for their sacrifices, Canadian Vietnam veterans

were forgotten.”<sup>7</sup> In Gaffen’s follow-up volume, *Cross Border Warriors* (1995), he explains that there has not been significant change for Canadian Vietnam Veterans in the years following his first book (noting that they had been denied federal land in Ottawa to build a memorial), and he reaffirms the negative reception that Canadian Vietnam Veterans have faced in their birth country up to the present.<sup>8</sup> In 1996, Tracey Arial published the similarly themed *I Volunteered: Canadian Vietnam Vets Remember*, a volume, like *Unknown Warriors*, that collected many first-hand accounts from Canadian-born servicemen in a further attempt to remedy the glaring absence in the historiography, and to give many of these veterans an opportunity to share their experiences. Although Arial has produced a commendable volume, it is quite clear that she is personally invested in the topic and does not compromise in her strongly-worded, but perhaps overstated, conclusion that “...the contributions that Vietnam veterans have made to Canada are immense, but they could do even more if we’d stop ignoring them and help.”<sup>9</sup>

### Canadian Vietnam War Veterans – Service, Organization, Commemoration

Despite the lack of literature, however, a mere cursory analysis of the facts and figures regarding the Canadians who served in Vietnam is quite telling to their not-insignificant contribution in the conflict. The statistic that is perhaps most startling is that the number of Canadians who served in Vietnam (somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000) is likely a higher total than the number of Canadians who served in Korea or

Afghanistan and over 125 of these Canadians in Vietnam paid the ultimate price. One estimate by former US Senator Bob Smith holds that as many as 400 Canadians were killed and 4,000 wounded in Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> Many of these Canadian-born men who served also won US military accolades, including the Purple Heart, the Air Medal, and the Bronze Star, and one Canadian in particular, Peter C. Lemon (a native of Toronto), won the Congressional Medal of Honor – the highest decoration awarded in the US Armed Forces.<sup>11</sup> From the sweltering jungles of Quảng Nam Province, to the sprawling cityscape of Saigon, and from the Tet Offensive to Operation *Rolling Thunder*, thousands of Canadian-born men served in the most substantial armed conflict of the Cold War. Regardless of their personal motives for enlisting, there is certainly no individual who can refute the bravery and sense of duty that these Canadians possessed while serving in the US armed forces overseas.

In later decades, starting from the 1980s, a number of private Vietnam veterans’ organizations were established across Canada, notably, the Canadian Vietnam Veterans Association (CVVA), Vietnam Veterans in Canada (VVIC), and the Association Québécoise des Vétérans du Vietnam (CVVQ). In 1989, the CVVQ spearheaded the erection of a privately funded Canadian Vietnam veterans memorial (the first of its kind in the country), a monument which rests in Melocheville, Quebec, and is emblazoned with the simple yet meaningful phrase, “...dedicated to those who served, those who died, and those who are missing in action.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in 1995, the Canadian Vietnam Veterans National Memorial was dedicated in Windsor, Ontario, to all the Canadian casualties of



Infantrymen crowd a mud-filled bomb crater and look up at tall jungle trees seeking out Viet Cong snipers firing at them during a battle at Phuoc Vinh north-northeast of Saigon, 15 June 1967.

AP/ Henri Hue/Photo 670615016





Mikerussell at en.wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org)

Canada did not support the US involvement in Vietnam, yet the City of Windsor allowed for a waterfront memorial to be erected honouring Canadians lost fighting with the American armed forces there.

the war. This monument, however, was privately funded by the Michigan Association of Concerned Veterans (MACV), after a proposal to erect a national memorial on federal land failed to pass through the Canadian Parliament.<sup>13</sup> In May 1994, the Chrétien Government's justification for rejecting the proposal to place a Vietnam War memorial on federal land was that Canada did not officially participate in the war, and consequently, Canada does not memorialize those who served in such unofficial wars. Perhaps most powerfully, Michel Dupuy, then Minister of Canadian Heritage, further explained the government's refusal to support a Vietnam War memorial by stating in the House of Commons: "We are going to respect Canadian Ways."<sup>14</sup> Although the term "Canadian Ways" is perhaps somewhat ambiguous, in this context, we can interpret Minister Dupuy's words as a phrase which highlights the Canadian opposition to Vietnam, and as a reaffirmation of the nation's strong diplomatic values established in the decades of the Cold War. Lastly, Vietnam Veterans are also not represented on the National War Memorial in Ottawa, a monument that ultimately commemorates all individuals who have died, or may die in the future, in the military service of Canada. Many of those Canadians who fell in Vietnam, however, have been immortalized on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Canadian Vietnam War veterans have also been excluded from the seven Books of Remembrance located in the Peace Tower in the Houses of Parliament in Ottawa. These books record and

commemorate every Canadian (and pre-1949 Newfoundlander) who has fallen in the major conflicts in which Canada has participated since 1884. The Seventh Book, entitled "In the Service of Canada" commemorates any Canadian military personnel who have died "while serving *our country* in uniform" since October 1947 (excluding the Korean War which has its own book).<sup>15</sup> There is no prerequisite of having to have been born in Canada to have one's name inscribed in the book. Based upon the sole criterion for inclusion into the Books of Remembrance, Canadians who fell in Vietnam do not belong, as those who died did so in the service of the United States. In a similar respect, Veterans Affairs Canada defines Remembrance Day, Canada's official day of military recognition and commemoration, as a day for "...the men and women who have served, and continue to serve our country during times of war, conflict and peace. We honour those who fought for Canada..."<sup>16</sup> Similar to the Books of Remembrance, the commemorative emphasis of Remembrance Day rests upon the service to the nation of Canada.

Although Canadian Vietnam War veterans have been deprived an official war memorial, entry in the Books of Remembrance, and a general lack of veneration on Remembrance Day (both privately and publically), perhaps most meaningful has been their great difficulty in obtaining full service or medical benefits.<sup>17</sup> Following the war, the Canadian government refused to provide veterans' benefits for Canadian Vietnam veterans because

“the reciprocity agreement [between the US and Canada] did not cover a war in which Canada did not participate.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, it was not until 1988 (15 years after the US left Vietnam) that the Reagan Administration passed a law that extended service and medical benefits to any individual, regardless of nationality, who had served with the US military. This change seems to have been influenced by the lobbying of Canadian Vietnam veterans groups, and especially, their pilgrimage to the national memorial in Washington, DC in 1986.<sup>19</sup> Service benefits are ultimately available from the US for Canadian-born Vietnam War veterans, and the Government of Canada has no obligation to provide additional benefits to veterans of a foreign war.

### Conclusions

Perhaps in a microcosm of the official commemoration of Canadian Vietnam War veterans, the expansive Cold War exhibit of the national Canadian War Museum contains only one small glass display dedicated to the Vietnam War. Inside the lone Vietnam case there is but one period uniform on a mannequin with a brief explanation detailing that 30,000-40,000 Canadians may have served in the conflict. The War Museum is invariably one of the finest cultural institutions in the country, but this very small representation of Vietnam likely speaks to the general Canadian cognizance of these servicemen and their service.

A relatively comparable situation to the Canadian involvement in Vietnam is the American Civil War, where thousands of Canadians served on both Confederate and Union sides despite Canada’s official position as a non-belligerent. Still, these Canadian veterans of the American Civil War are not, and never have been, commemorated in this nation in an official capacity. Furthermore, before the US officially joined the First and Second World Wars in late- 1917 and 1941 respectively, many Americans (35,000 during the First World War, and 29,000 during the Second world War)<sup>20</sup> enlisted in the Canadian armed forces, and those who served and fell are forever inscribed on Canadian memorials, plaques, and the pages of our history (including the Books of Remembrance). In terms of constructing an official monument on federal land to the Vietnam War, such an action could almost certainly establish a precedent of memorializing any conflict in which Canada was not involved, but where Canadian-born men and women happened to serve. Should Canada also construct a memorial to Canadians who served in the recent Iraq War (where many Canadian-born military personnel served)? What about with respect to foreign conflicts where Canadians may have served for a nation other than the US? If we place the Vietnam War in the context of these questions, the case becomes clearer that such a public monument should never be constructed. In sum, if an individual serves in Canada’s armed forces, *regardless of their personal nationality*, then they will be rightfully



Uniform of a Canadian who served in the US military in Vietnam, as displayed at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

venerated and commemorated in this nation (during Remembrance Day and otherwise). The emphasis is upon the service to the nation. Canadian Vietnam War Veterans served in the US armed forces, and are thus included in the commemorations and memorials in that nation – the fact that they are nationally Canadian should be considered immaterial.

The other issue in commemorating and memorializing Canadian Vietnam War veterans in Canada, and one that cannot be overstated is Canada’s *official* stance of neutrality in the Vietnam War. The definitive statement not to participate in the conflict was a serious and important one taken as a Canadian sovereign nation. By officially honouring veterans of a conflict in which Canada was strictly opposed to participating, Canada’s resolute message and reputation in Vietnam would be invariably muddled and damaged. As a reiteration, it was also technically illegal for Canadians to serve in foreign armed forces in a conflict that Canada was not involved, and the legality of the service of these Canadians of Vietnam presents yet another challenge to offering official commemoration.





A procession passes a crowd of approximately 800 that gathered at the Canadian Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Windsor, 28 June 2009, to pay homage to Canadians who served in the Vietnam War.

Ultimately, while Canadian Vietnam War veterans should be honoured and respected for their service, *official* commemoration of these veterans in Canada should remain in the *status quo*. Canadian nationals who have served in the US military should be officially venerated in the US, particularly during Memorial Day and Veterans Day. Those who have served and died in the service of Canada will continue to be commemorated in this nation – this is the Canadian way.

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## NOTES

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