

“As Long as We Live, You Shall be Remembered”: Canadian Veterans of the Vietnam War and Their Struggle for Recognition

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As my countrymen will readily admit, Canada's best known contribution to the barrage of anti-war music that hit the airwaves during Vietnam Era is the 1970 track “American Woman” from Winnipeg's *The Guess Who*. Not one for subtlety, the legendary Burton Cummings snarls against Randy Bachman's hard rock guitar: “American woman, listen what I say/Don't come a hangin' around my door/Don't want to see your face no more/I don't need your war machines/I don't need your ghetto scenes.” The song encapsulated a popular, though nowhere near universal, Canadian view of 1960s America as a country that had descended into a morass of bloody racial tension and overseas aggression. For the past half century, Canadians have been singing this tune, one that grossly distorts Canada's role during the period. Canada was never quite the sage non-belligerent in a terribly destructive, unnecessary war of American making that we imagine, nor, at the individual level, did it simply provide a safe-haven for young American men fleeing the draft. As comfortable as we are with this narrative, it feeds into a dangerously misplaced sense of moral superiority north of the border. The Canadian government may have quietly opposed the war, but it certainly did not want to see a neighbor that happened to be its primary military ally and trading partner go down to a humiliating defeat in the jungles of Southeast Asia. As a result, Canada operated a Vietnam policy that was calculated and two-faced in many respects. As many on the left lamented at the time, Canada profited handsomely from a vigorous trade in war materiel that continued even after Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau formally welcomed American draft dodgers north in 1969. But perhaps more significantly, the thousands of American draft evaders that came north were actually only part of a two-way traffic of potential military personnel during this period; Ottawa made no serious effort to block an equivalent number of Canadians – technically law breakers – from heading south to replace them.

This chapter is devoted to exploring the postwar experiences of the roughly 30,000 Canadians who joined the US military and fought in the Vietnam War.

Few Canadians are aware of the existence of this cohort of young men, in part because their decision to serve seems so counterintuitive in hindsight. Conventional thinking goes that the war was unpopular, the war was wrong from the beginning and many knew it, the war was unwinnable, the war killed so many civilians, and the war broke the American warriors that went to fight it, and so on. Why then did so many risk their lives for this foreign cause? The motivations of these men – for the most part just barely out of high school – varied, but generally fell within a spectrum ranging from the practical to idealistic. Some had prior peacetime service in the Canadian military and wanted a chance to see combat, some lamented their government's inaction in the face of North Vietnamese aggression, some were anti-communist Cold Warriors, some sought adventure in an exotic locale, some saw the US military as a vehicle to pick up skills and job training, and others were running from trouble at home. Members of First Nations communities in particular saw the war as an opportunity to continue the proud warrior traditions of their people. There simply is no composite sketch of the Canadian Vietnam veteran: each made the decision to serve for unique and fascinating circumstances.

The decision these men made to serve is completely fitting with a long and well-established tradition of cross-border military service. Thousands of Canadians went south to fight for the Union in the Civil War and then thousands of Americans headed north to join the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in the early days of both World Wars while their government remained neutral. It would be more surprising had a large number of Canadians *not* donned American uniforms in the Vietnam War. The reality is that the close proximity, shared and intertwined history, and broadly similar cultural values between Canada and the United States mean that volunteers from each country have always and will likely continue to serve in each other's military during wartime. Many Canadians have chosen to ignore the fact that more of their countrymen fought in Vietnam than in the United Nations-sanctioned war in Korea from 1950-53 or any other conflict excepting the World Wars, while it is almost certain that more died there than in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001-2011.¹

Canadians have been more than willing to memorialize the Americans that fought on their behalf, which makes their reluctance to acknowledge their

1 An estimated 30,000 Canadians served in the US military in Vietnam compared to 26,000 who were part of UN forces in Korea. Canada suffered 159 war dead in Afghanistan and 134 confirmed in Vietnam, though it is likely that there were at dozens more who have yet to be fully identified. See: Chris Corday, "Lost to History: the Canadians who fought in Vietnam," *CBC News*, November 10, 2015. Accessed February 28, 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/lost-to-history-the-canadians-who-fought-in-vietnam-1.3304440>.