

## THE CANADIAN FORCES IN RWANDA

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Being a member of the Canadian Forces is not like any other job. The danger and threats that come along with the profession are difficult to understand for those who have not personally experienced them. A prime example of these special challenges was the situation faced by Canadians serving with United Nations (UN) peace missions to Rwanda from 1993 to 1996. At times, more than 400 Canadian soldiers would find themselves in the midst of some of the worst violence that could be imagined while taking part in international peace efforts to try to bring some stability to the embattled African nation.

## RWANDA

Rwanda is a small, rural nation in central Africa. This densely-populated country has an area of about 26,000 square kilometres (making it about half the size of Nova Scotia) and a population of approximately eight million.

For centuries, two tribes have made up the vast majority of the country's population: the Hutus and the Tutsis. The Tutsis, despite being in the minority, dominated Rwanda's economy and politics for centuries. In 1960, the Hutu majority rose up and forced the Tutsi king and hundreds of thousands of Tutsis to flee the country in the ensuing upheaval.

Rwanda achieved independence in 1961 but the unrest continued. Some of the Tutsis who had fled the country formed rebel groups and repeatedly tried to make an armed comeback in Rwanda. This led to decades of renewed ethnic violence and tensions. In

1990s, these tensions flared dramatically. Violence became widespread and the situation in the country moved towards full-scale civil war.

## THE WORLD RESPONDS

In the face of this turmoil, Canada and other UN countries moved to try to end the bloodshed and restore order. The UN undertook peace missions to Rwanda from 1993 to 1996, the largest being the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) in which Canada played a leading role. At different times during the mission, two Canadians would serve as the Commander of the UN mission. They were Major-General Roméo Dallaire and Major-General Guy Tousignant.

Even with the UN mission to Rwanda in place, the bad situation in the country turned into a nightmare in April 1994. The Hutus began to massacre hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The UN soldiers did what they could in this chaotic environment of widespread killing and mayhem, but they were too few in number and hamstrung by their limited mandate. In the end, they could not prevent the worst of the horrific violence. The Canadian and other UN forces did remain in the country for a time to try to help the country with some humanitarian efforts, mineclearing and refugee resettlement before leaving the devastated country in 1996.

Today, Rwanda still suffers from instability and outbreaks of violence as it struggles to overcome the legacies of its violent past. The civil war, genocide,



and massive refugee upheavals still impact the country more than a decade later.

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- The estimated number of people who died in the genocide in Rwanda ranges between 500,000 and one million people. Millions more were left homeless and displaced in the upheaval.
- In the time since the genocide, the world has come to realize the depth of the horrendous events in the country. In recognition of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the onset of the Rwandan genocide, April 7, 2004, was declared an International Day of Reflection.

## HEROES AND BRAVERY

Major Brent Beardsley, the Military Assistant to the Force Commander of the UN mission in Rwanda, was awarded the Meritorious Service Cross for facing armed and hostile civilian mobs and rebel soldiers to rescue people who were being threatened by the crowds. He entered violent crowds to save a family from being swarmed, to rescue a doctor and nurse from being assaulted, to get a severely-wounded man to a hospital and to escort the UN Force Commander to headquarters.

Major-General Roméo Dallaire won the Meritorious Service Cross for his efforts as head of the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda in 1993-94. He worked bravely and tirelessly in conditions of great danger to negotiate cease-fires and reduce the unrest in the country. He tried to get greater help from the UN to try to prevent the genocide he feared was coming. In the torrent of murder that occurred, he was able to evacuate many foreigners from the country and save the lives of thousands of Rwandans through his actions.

Major-General Guy Tousignant earned the Meritorious Service Cross for his actions as Force Commander of the UN mission in Rwanda in 1994-95. He demonstrated leadership, courage and professionalism in delicate negotiations involving rival factions during a period of great unrest. Tousignant's work with official Rwandan government representatives facilitated the safe return of thousands of refugees.

## SACRIFICE

When Canadian Forces members enter into a peace mission, they are going into a dangerous situation where the risk of harm is very real. Approximately 125 Canadian personnel have died in the course of peace missions in foreign lands, including one who gave his life in Rwanda.



When people think of ‘peacekeeping,’ they may not realize just how little ‘peace’ there often is to keep. In Rwanda, Canadian Forces members found themselves in the middle of a chaotic conflict zone where danger and bloodshed were everywhere.

Hostile fire, violent crowds and vehicle accidents all posed a risk to the Canadians in Rwanda, but there were other dangers too. The wounds of peacekeeping are not always the obvious physical ones of a war zone. Witnessing human brutality of the most horrific kind has a deep and lasting impact on those who see it. This has been one of the harshest legacies of Canada’s peace support mission in Rwanda. Some of the Veterans who served there have since suffered from a serious emotional disorder called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Canadian Forces Veterans proudly carried on the tradition set many years ago by the Veterans of Canada’s efforts in the First World War, Second World War and Korean War. Our country has participated in the vast majority of peace missions that the UN has undertaken over the years, making our nation an important part of the effort to keep the peace around the globe. Like the Veterans who fought in these conflicts, they have made significant achievements and heavy sacrifices in the protection of peace and freedom worldwide.

## CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

Knowing about Canada’s values and history helps us understand the country we live in today and how we can build our future together. The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by Canada’s Veterans during times of war, military conflict and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will help to preserve their legacy for future generations of Canadians.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Veterans Affairs Canada:  
[www.vac-acc.gc.ca](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca)
- Canadian Military History Gateway:  
[www.cmhg.gc.ca](http://www.cmhg.gc.ca)
- Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association:  
[www.cpva.ca](http://www.cpva.ca)
- Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping:  
[www.cavunp.org](http://www.cavunp.org)
- The Royal Canadian Legion:  
[www.legion.ca](http://www.legion.ca)
- United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda:  
[www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co\\_mission/unamir](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/unamir)

