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Cyprus and Canadian Peacekeeping

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For the past four years, Canadian soldiers returning from the war in Afghanistan have stopped on the island of Cyprus for five days of enforced rest, recreation and stress briefings to prepare them for reintegration into the pace of daily life in Canada. The choice of Cyprus as a site of relaxation for soldiers leaving a theatre of war is perhaps ironic because Cyprus is also a conflict zone, albeit one tamed by the United Nations peacekeeping force that has served there for two generations. In 1964, Canadian soldiers made up the first international contingent to arrive in Cyprus to defuse a crisis when ethnic violence between the Greek-Cypriot majority and Turkish-Cypriot minority threatened to spiral into war in the Mediterranean between Greece and Turkey. For 29 years, Canada joined other countries in contributing contingents to the United Nations Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). Peacekeepers on the island patrolled the Green Line, a narrow buffer zone between the two combatants, and reported on troop movements and ceasefire violations. In 1993, with the Canadian government facing mounting demands for military support to UN missions in more pressing and dangerous conflicts in Africa, the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, and elsewhere, Canada ended its major commitment to UNFICYP. Today, one Canadian staff officer remains in UNFICYP headquarters to show the flag while soldiers returning from Afghanistan enjoy the island’s beaches.

The Cyprus mission is historically significant for Canada for a number of reasons. Over 20,000 Canadians served there from 1964 to 1993, many on multiple tours. It represents Canada’s longest “traditional” peacekeeping mission, where an armed but impartial UN force was invited by both sides in the conflict to keep the peace until a diplomatic solution could be found. Canada’s decision to supply troops to the Cyprus mission satisfied our national interests as defined in Cold War foreign and defence policies. Canadian support for peacekeeping largely served the goals of the Western alliance: a peacekeeping force in Suez in 1956 prevented Soviet military intervention in the Middle East, and the force in Cyprus prevented Greece and Turkey, two NATO partners, from warring over the island, which housed strategic British naval and air bases. In Canada, peacekeeping rapidly became a popular application of military power, and successive governments found themselves influenced by public opinion to take on new missions regardless of their prospects for success.
Canada agreed to send forces to Cyprus in March 1964, Arthur Andrew, Canada’s High Commissioner to Cyprus, warned his superiors, “Should it be decided to send troops, on present form in my judgement it will not be a short or easy job.”

For the first ten years of the mission, Cyprus at least posed few dangers for Canadian troops, whose tours comprised six monotonous months of duty in fixed observation posts. In July 1974, however, a Greek-inspired coup overthrew the Cypriot president, Archbishop Makarios III, and installed a former leader of a Greek-Cypriot terrorist cell intent on enosis, political union of Cyprus with Greece. Within days, the Turkish armed forces dusted off their 1964 invasion plans and sent 40,000 troops to assault the island with the stated intention of securing the Turkish minority. The United Nations force was caught in the middle of the war. Four hundred and fifty soldiers of 1 Commando, Canadian Airborne Regiment were caught in the capital city of Nicosia. Under fire from both sides, UNFICYP repeatedly sought to secure local ceasefires and, when these failed, the Canadian contingent placed strategic assets such as Nicosia International Airport and the Ledra Palace Hotel under UN control as a means of limiting the conflict. Seventeen Canadians were wounded in the fighting, and Privates Gilbert Perron and Jean-Claude Berger were killed by rifle fire. In one incident on 23 June at Camp Kronberg, north of Nicosia, Canadians were forced to return fire at Greek forces that attacked a patrol leading Turkish soldiers back to their lines under UN protection. Lasting only a few minutes, the firefight was the Canadian army’s first combat since the Korean War. In reaction to these firefights, the Trudeau government doubled the Canadian presence on Cyprus and provided soldiers with armoured personnel.
carriers and anti-tank weapons to offer some defence against Turkish and Greek armour.\textsuperscript{5}

Canada’s casualties in Cyprus that summer underlined that peacekeeping duties were rarely peaceful, but the losses garnered little attention at home, where Parliament was out of session and the press preoccupied with impeachment rumours and the resignation of United States President Richard Nixon following the Watergate scandal. Though this new phase in the conflict largely passed by without great public notice, this is not to say the changes made to the Cyprus mission that summer were insignificant. In the words of Lieutenant-Colonel Don Manuel, commanding officer of 1 Commando, Canadian Airborne Regiment: “Well, if we were bored with the lack of progress by the politicians...the situation changed dramatically with the military coup which overthrew the government and resulted in an invasion by Turkish national forces in a strength of 40,000; the fall of two governments; the military withdrawal of Greece from NATO...To say the least it was interesting to be in the middle.”\textsuperscript{6}

This year, the Canadian War Museum completes an upgrade to Gallery 4: A Violent Peace: The Cold War, Peacekeeping, and Current Conflicts that highlights the Cyprus mission’s importance to contemporary Canadian military history. Faced with the challenge of capturing in the displays the monotony of daily duties in observation posts (OPs) and the more dangerous combat conditions introduced by the Turkish invasion, the Museum approached veterans of the 1974 mission for their personal souvenirs, photographs, and oral histories. The exhibits benefitted from the enthusiastic cooperation of dozens of veterans across the country, including the former Canadian contingent commander, intelligence officers, engineers, platoon commanders, non-commissioned officers and private soldiers, many of whom were active participants in the key UN movements during the crisis. The Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps Museum at CFB Longue Pointe facilitated the long-term loan of the display’s signature artefact, Private Michel Plouffe’s helmet, damaged when he was struck in the head and injured by a Greek bullet during a firefight. Portions of the display
opened in mid-July 2009, in time for the Airborne Regiment Association of Canada’s 35th anniversary reunion to celebrate the Canadian role in the 1974 crisis. The display opened to the public in May 2010, representing the first major addition to the Canadian War Museum’s permanent galleries since the institution opened at its new location in Ottawa five years ago.

1. See Anne Irwin, “Redeployment as a Rite of Passage,” Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (April 2008), <www.cdfai.org/PDF/Redeployment%20as%20a%20Rite%20of%20Passage.pdf>.

2. British and American diplomats originally planned to resolve the conflict with a NATO peacekeeping force for the island, with Greece and Turkey’s reluctant agreement, but Cypriot President Archbishop Makarios III rejected the proposal in February 1964. The possibility of the Soviets gaining ground in Cyprus was an important part of Canada’s deliberations over whether to send troops to join the UN peacekeeping mission. See Sean Maloney, Canada and UN Peacekeeping: Cold War by Other Means 1945-1970. (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing, 2002). See also Paul Martin, A Very Public Life II: So Many Worlds. (Toronto: Deneau, 1985), pp.540-548.

3. In the case of Cyprus, on 6 March 1964 Department of External Affairs officials, who on the whole appear to have been sceptical of the mission’s prospects for success, weighed the positive and negative consequences of signing on to UNFICYP, and noted domestic political pressure as a factor: “There is also in this country a strong body of opinion which holds that this situation is a challenge to Canada’s reputation as a realistic proponent of the theory of international peacekeeping and that to refuse to participate in a worthwhile exercise because of the dangers involved would tarnish our reputation abroad.” Library and Archives Canada (LAC) RG 25 Vol 10130 File 21-14-1-CYP pt 4.

