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The Vietnam War: Canada's Role, Part One

From CBC Radio - Rewind

Vietnam may have been America's war but Canada was heavily involved — for and against. Canada harboured roughly 30,000 American draft dodgers. But at the same time, about 30,000 Canadians volunteered to fight in Southeast Asia. Canada was also involved in secret missions, weapons testing, arms production, and the supervision of ceasefires.



Despite a law that made it illegal, many individual Canadians chose to sign up with the U.S. armed forces to fight in Vietnam. While most went south of the border to sign up, one man asked the Canadian government for permission to put together a Canadian unit to train and fight with the Americans. In 1966, CBC's Tim Raife talked to Don Echlin about his plan. CBC Radio and Television covered the war extensively for all the years it was being fought, with correspondents like Joe Schlesinger, Peter Kent, Mike Duffy and Knowlton Nash reporting. The war came daily into the living rooms of Canadians and Americans for years, but by 1973 it looked like it might be coming to an end as President Richard Nixon signed the Paris Peace Accord. CBC reporter Joe Schlesinger talked to CBC Weekend host Jim Eayrs about the heavy fighting he had witnessed more than a day after the ceasefire went into effect.

April 29, 1975. People try to scale the 14-foot wall of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, trying to reach evacuation helicopters, as the last of the Americans depart from Vietnam. The war ended on April 30, 1975, with the fall of Saigon, now known as Ho Chi Minh City, to communist troops from the north. (The Associated Press)

The long sputtering end to the war continued in spite of the ceasefire. Canada played a role as part of the hastily-formed International Commission of Control and Supervision or ICC. The CBC's Joe Schlesinger reported. Canadians withdrew from the commission in July 1973, but it continued to operate until April 30, 1975. It proved to be a frustrating experience. An article on the Canadian Department of Defence website described it as follows: "Everything is complicated, and one officer later remarked that his six months in Saigon included eight weeks in a traffic jam, six weeks trying to complete one phone call, eight weeks of sleep and two weeks of work he would normally wrap up in four days at home."

By April 1975, the communist takeover of South Vietnam was looming. Diplomats scrambled to pull Canadians out of Saigon. Peter Kent, then a correspondent for CBC Radio, now a Conservative member of Parliament, reported.

Agent Orange was one of the dirtiest legacies of the Vietnam War. Ottawa had always denied that we cooperated with the United States in testing chemical warfare agents for Vietnam. But in 1981 a report found that in June 1966 the American army tested Agent Orange in Canada. In 2007 the Canadian government set aside almost \$100 million for Canadians harmed by the testing.

When 30,000 Canadians enlisted in the U.S. army to fight in Vietnam, they were welcomed, treated like U.S. recruits, even given a U.S. social security number. Upon their return, however, they received none of the same benefits as their fellow American soldiers. They fought for those same rights in 1986, when they formed the Canadian Vietnam Veterans Association. In 1988 the Reagan administration passed a bill that authorized Canadian Vietnam vets to receive medical treatment in Canada.

By 2000, twenty-five years had passed since the end of the war. Analysts looked back at what happened. As *It Happens* spoke with former Canadian diplomat Ernest Hebert about Canada's role in those chaotic final days of the war.

In 2003, CBC Radio's *The Current* examined Canada's involvement in the Vietnam War. Host Anna Maria Tremonti spoke with former Canadian diplomat Blair Seaborn, a Canadian who had conducted top-secret missions to Hanoi during the Vietnam War. She also spoke with Victor Levant who felt that Canada's involvement in Vietnam is a story of diplomatic skullduggery, economic entanglement and political duplicity.

The Vietnam War officially ended in April 1975. In the years following, over one million refugees fled the war-ravaged countries of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Those Vietnamese who took to the ocean in tiny overcrowded ships were dubbed the boat people. Canada accepted 69,000 Indochinese refugees between 1975 and 1980. On the next edition of *Rewind*, an hour on the exodus of refugees known as the boat people from post-war Vietnam.