



The Canadian Armed Forces during natural disasters at home



The Canadian Armed Forces perform many essential duties. While traditional military roles like defending our country and being ready to fight in conflicts are crucial, our service members are often called on to do other important things. Having a large team of disciplined and well-trained people available to tackle other kinds of major challenges can be very valuable. One example of this vital assistance can be seen when natural disasters like forest fires, floods and storms threaten Canadians, and our military is mobilized to help.

DOMESTIC OPERATIONS

Canadian Armed Forces members are continually active here at home. They patrol our skies and coasts, and launch search and rescue efforts when ships are in distress or when planes go down in remote areas. They train constantly at military bases across the country to hone their abilities, help out in pandemic responses, and so much more.

The duties are many but a common theme is that our service members are dedicated to helping keep Canadians safe—whatever form that support may take. The unique resources that our military can bring to the table—ships, aircraft, specialized vehicles, communications resources and large numbers of dedicated and highly trained personnel—means they can accomplish some truly remarkable things.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Canada is a vast country with millions of square kilometres of forests, countless rivers and an environment that can often be severe. When provincial or territorial authorities feel that they cannot handle natural disaster responses by themselves, they can request assistance from the Canadian Armed Forces. Our military personnel can then help stack sandbags to hold back floods, fight forest fires,

evacuate people in danger, deliver supplies, help local law enforcement, check houses door-to-door, assess the damage, and more.

Canadian Armed Forces members have always stood ready to help out here at home during emergencies like Hurricane Hazel that struck Toronto in the 1950s or the flooding in the Saguenay River in Quebec in the mid-1990s. The late 1990s, however, would see them tackling these kinds of efforts on a whole new scale.

1997 RED RIVER FLOODS

The Red River flows for about 250 kilometres across southeastern Manitoba. It passes through numerous communities along the way, including the city of Winnipeg. While some flooding there is not uncommon, the spring of 1997 would prove to be exceptional when wet weather, warm temperatures and the rapid melting of snow resulted in extremely high water levels. Alarmed by the situation, the government of Manitoba requested assistance from the Canadian Armed Forces. On 21 April 1997, our military launched “Operation ASSISTANCE.” It would be the largest domestic military operation that had ever been launched up to that time, with more than 8,500 Canadian service members from regular force and reserve units across the country ultimately taking part.

They provided vital assistance to provincial and municipal authorities, as well as to the thousands of civilian volunteers who were helping battle the flood waters. Our troops worked long hours filling sandbags, helping build levees and running drainage pumps. They also evacuated residents at risk and provided medical assistance for those in need. Military engineers helped check the roads and bridges that had been affected. Thirty-two military aircraft, mostly helicopters, logged some 1,500 hours of flying time during these efforts, while amphibious vehicles were used to travel across the flooded terrain. The struggle against nature was challenging and, despite their best efforts, some areas would still suffer heavy flooding.

As the waters ebbed, people began to return to their homes, often with military assistance. With the need for a large scale relief effort lessening, on May 13 a large convoy of Canadian Armed Forces vehicles drove through downtown Winnipeg on their way back to their home bases. The streets were lined with many appreciative people who cheered those who had done so much to help.

1998 GREAT ICE STORM

Less than a year after the major flooding on the Red River, the Canadian Armed Forces would again be called on to help during a domestic natural disaster—and this time in even greater numbers. An extremely damaging ice storm struck parts of eastern Ontario, southern Quebec and New Brunswick in early January 1998. After days of freezing rain, the weight of the accumulated ice on power lines, trees and large buildings resulted in great damage. Indeed, some 30,000 wooden utility poles snapped, 130 major high-voltage transmission towers toppled, 120,000 kilometres of electrical and phone lines went out of service and many large buildings like arenas and barns had their roofs collapse. More than one million households lost their power, leaving some four million people without lights, central heating, running water, refrigeration or hot meals in the depths of winter. The overwhelmed local authorities

needed a lot of help in a hurry and our military quickly rose to the challenge.

The Canadian Armed Forces disaster response—codenamed “Operation RECUPERATION”—was launched on 8 January 1998. Our soldiers cleared debris, rescued stranded people and animals, sheltered and fed tens of thousands of people who had been forced out of their homes, and supported farms that had been impacted by the storm. They also shared their specialized expertise, with military engineers and technicians working around the clock to help crews repair downed power and telephone lines. They even stepped in to maintain the rule of law in some of the most devastated areas. More than 15,750 regular and reserve force personnel from approximately 200 military units across Canada would serve in this effort by the time Operation RECUPERATION came to a close. It was a huge effort that had a vital impact on those who had been affected by the storm.

MORE RECENT RELIEF EFFORTS

While the Red River Floods and the Great Ice Storm of the late 1990s were iconic Canadian Armed Forces domestic operational deployments, the need for military assistance to provincial or territorial authorities during natural disasters has continued in the years that have followed. The range of these kinds of efforts has been wide—from the military responses to Hurricane Juan in the Maritimes in 2003, blizzards in Newfoundland in 2020 and flooding in southern Alberta in 2013, to forest fires around Fort McMurray in 2016 and in British Columbia in 2021.

As climate change makes extreme weather more common in Canada, the need for comprehensive large-scale responses to natural disasters is expected to increase. The Canadian Armed Forces will continue to be an important player in our national strategies to help those affected by these dynamic events that can put people and property at great risk.



FACTS AND FIGURES

- The almost 16,000 Canadian Armed Forces members who helped in the aftermath of the 1998 Great Ice Storm made it the largest domestic deployment of troops in our country's history. In fact, it was the largest operational deployment of Canadian military personnel since the Korean War.
- In more recent years, the Canadian Armed Forces use the codename "Operation LENTUS" for its responses to domestic natural disasters. There were seven separate Operation LENTUS deployments in 2021 alone, with troops being sent to assist people in the Yukon, Nunavut, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador.
- On some occasions, such as in northern Manitoba in the late summer of 2017, Canadian Armed Forces aircraft are used to evacuate remote First Nations communities with limited or non-existent road access that are threatened by wildfires and smoke.

HEROES AND BRAVERY

Canadian Armed Forces members must carry out heavy work in sometimes perilous situations during natural disaster relief operations. Fighting forest fires in the wilderness or driving along flooded roads can carry major risks, as does working around electricity and heavy machinery when helping rebuild power grids or clearing damaged trees and buildings. Conducting aerial operations in smoky skies during wildfires has hazards of its own and requires considerable skill and awareness. Through it all, our military personnel put their lives on the line to help others.

As we think of the countless brave Canadians in uniform who served our country over the years, we will also

remember those who have supported people in need here at home. These individuals take their honoured place beside their fellow service members of the past who have done so much so we could live in a peaceful and secure land.

SACRIFICE

The dangers of military service are not always the obvious ones of fighting in wars and being on guard for bombs, gunfire or landmines. It is not easy to be a Canadian Armed Forces member during a natural disaster relief operation. Being deployed far from home, working exhausting hours in harsh conditions, facing risks to life and limb, and seeing others in distress can all take a difficult toll.

Whatever their contributions might be, the Canadians who take part in these efforts have carried on the proud military tradition of helping our country, while contributing to the safety and security of us all. Their service and sacrifice will not be forgotten.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war, military conflict and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about the efforts of the Canadian Armed Forces here in Canada, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at veterans.gc.ca or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

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