

NATO Celebrates Its 40th



Canadian Forces

Canadian forces in a NATO winter exercise.

On April 4, 1949, Canada's Foreign Minister Lester B. Pearson joined representatives from the governments of the United States and 10 European countries at Washington's White House. They had come together to sign a document destined to alter forever the course of European history — the North Atlantic Treaty. It created an alliance of unprecedented scope, a multinational military force of sufficient might to maintain European stability through four consecutive decades, and a security umbrella that helped pave the way for the political and economic re-emergence of a vibrant European community.

This April marked the 40th anniversary of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty. For Canadians it was a time to reflect on the history of an international role that has kept Canada's troops on European soil almost continuously since 1939 — a chance to celebrate the success of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in maintaining security without armed conflict.

Working for Peace

In the dark days following the Second World War, leaders of democratic states on both sides of the Atlantic sought a political route to rebuild Europe, without re-creating the national rivalries that had led to two horrifying global conflicts in the first half of this century.

The outlook for peace was anything but optimistic. Europe lay shattered, its

great cities in ruins, its people emotionally and economically devastated, its political institutions unstable. But conflict was not to end with the close of the Second World War. Stalin's army remained at full war-time strength. And, with a civil war in Greece, the Berlin blockade, the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia and political turmoil in Western Europe, the continent seemed poised for another major war.

Against this backdrop, the free countries of Europe and North America joined together to create an organization for common defence. Each was ready to accept the idea that keeping the peace would require extraordinary skill, hard work and commitment. First and foremost, NATO's purpose was to prevent conflict or repel it should it arise. But NATO also provided a means for continuous co-operation, research and consultation in non-military areas such as politics, economics and science.

Each partner came to the Alliance prepared to maintain peace, defend freedom, foster stable international relations and stand by the principle that armed attack against one was an attack against all. Today, the Alliance is made up of 16 democratic states, bound to preserve the common security of over 600 million people through mutual guarantees and collective commitments to defence and international dialogue in accordance with the terms set forth by the United Nations Charter.

An Adaptable Alliance

Over the years NATO has proved to be an adaptable organization, accommodating the different perspectives of its member states and reflecting the experience of the times.

And over time as well, NATO has proved a powerful instrument in the reconstruction of war-torn Europe. It enabled the Federal Republic of Germany to regain political legitimacy and self-esteem. It provided a framework for post-war political stability which permitted a peaceful development of the European Community.

NATO's greatest success, however, lies in keeping Europe a war-free zone for 40 years. Says Joe Clark, Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, "In assessing the importance of NATO, it is worth noting that Europe is enjoying the longest sustained period of peace and stability since the height of the Holy Roman Empire."

A Tradition of Commitment

Canada has played a key role in NATO since its inception. Convinced that the security of North America and Europe was indivisible, the then Secretary of State for External Affairs Louis Saint-Laurent put forward the concept of a single mutual defence system in the House of Commons in April 1948. Part of Saint-Laurent's vision was a transatlantic alliance that would bring together members not only defensively, but also politically, economically, scientifically and culturally.