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Stories of Immigrant Service in the Militaries of the Five Eyes: *Insights and Opportunities for the Canadian Armed Forces*

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Many countries rely on immigration to sustain population growth and fill workforce needs. This includes Canada and its Five Eyes allies - the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and New Zealand, each of which has high rates of foreign-born population. Immigrants leave their homes for many reasons – including to pursue a better life, for family reunification, to flee persecution or violence, or to seek a safer environment. They bring to their new country skills, experience, and potential, as well as their networks, and join the workforce, including serving in their new country's military. Although some research on immigrants in the armed forces exists, little of that work focuses on the lived experiences of foreign-born immigrant soldiers, aviators and sailors from a comparative and international perspective. To fill this gap, we undertook a qualitative study using narrative interviews to explore stories of immigration and military service experiences by immigrant soldiers serving in the militaries of the Five Eyes countries.

We began our study in 2021 and completed data collection in 2024. Using snowball sampling, we gathered 57 interviews with immigrant servicemembers, including: 22 in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF); 15 in the US armed forces; 10 in the Australian Defence Force (ADF); five in the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF); and five in the UK military. Twenty-nine (29) of our respondents had prior military experience in their birth country before joining the military of their immigration destination; we refer to these participants as "lateral transfer soldiers". Those with no prior military service are identified as "new immigrant soldiers". One limitation of our sample is the low number of women (8). Interviews were conducted mostly virtually using Microsoft Teams to record the interview, while a few interviews were conducted in person with some of the CAF participants. The researchers had no predetermined research questions or hypotheses, but rather, they used narrative interviewing to allow participants to tell their stories in a communicative process where the interviewer's primary role is to listen to and learn from the storyteller. The transcriptions were independently verified by two members of the research team for quality assurance and accuracy. The software MAXQDA for qualitative data analysis was used to inductively code the transcriptions based on emerging themes.[1] In the next section we present the key findings for each of the Five Eyes countries.

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Key findings

Canada[2]

Before November 2022, only Canadian citizens were authorized to be recruited into the CAF, but the policy changed to allow permanent residents to join the military. Our CAF interviews were largely conducted before this shift. While we expected to interview new immigrant servicemembers who joined as new recruits and completed basic training, we also discovered an unanticipated group: immigrants who joined through the special skills immigration pathway (whom we call "lateral transfers"). The experiences of these two groups differed in many ways.

For lateral transfers, activating social capital played a role in their recruitment and immigration journey, as prior connections to soldiers and recruiting groups in the CAF were a main avenue through which participants learned about opportunities to join. These connections were mostly made when serving on an exchange program in Canada, or on deployments abroad. After being offered a CAF position, a job offer letter allowed them to independently navigate the Canadian immigration process.

In addition, all of the lateral transfer officers in our study were male; most had served a significant number of years in the military of their country of origin and decided to come to Canada to continue their military career, often because they had aged out of military service elsewhere (e.g. the UK limits service years). Challenges with fulfilling documentation to acquire permanent residence status were generally the most significant hurdle they faced. Some UK applicants had to take a language test even though they were educated in English. Upon accession to the CAF, they were often downranked and none received formal orientation training. Lateral transfer respondents indicated difficulties with the actual start of their service time, from no access to equipment like uniforms, to lack of recognition of relevant foreign military training credentials. For lateral transfers, concerns were voiced about: accession process in the CAF; (lack of) indoctrination and transition program into the CAF: (under-) utilization of their skill set and assessments of prior training; differences between the CAF and their home country military experience; and rank reduction when joining the CAF. Some immigrant soldiers were questioned about their loyalty to the CAF, although this was rarely the case for lateral transfers from the UK armed forces.

One core requirement for promotion in the CAF is fluency in both of Canada's official languages, English and French. This particularly affected Anglophone immigrant soldiers who were older upon entry. For lateral transfers especially, inability to acquire the required level of French prevented them from being promoted to higher positions to capitalize on their prior experience and training.

Women immigrants in our study, who joined as citizens through the usual ascension route after high school, faced racial and gender discrimination in the CAF. Sometimes discrimination was mitigated after getting to know people better. Female participants who experienced multiple forms of discrimination were hesitant to recommend to other women immigrants to join the military, wishing to spare them from similar harm. Despite this, these women were determined to remain in the CAF to continue to push for progress in addressing discrimination in the CAF. The mixed experiences of immigrants in the CAF in our study

point towards opportunities for the organisation to make adjustments in line with their changed policies which now allow for direct initial entry of permanent residents.

United States

In our interviews, immigrants serving in the US military expressed more positive experiences overall than those serving in Canada. This distinction may reflect the long history of the US allowing foreign born non-citizens to serve in their military. While US policies have varied over time, during the period leading up to our study, immigrants with the legal right to work in the US were welcome to apply to serve and could access a pathway that accelerated achieving citizenship status. However, as of now, there is no military service specific immigration pathway.[3] This means that the immigration decision and the military accession decision are largely separate. Permanent residency status of some participants impacted their military occupational choice due to the citizenship requirements for certain security clearances, which come with additional scrutiny including background checks with documentation. The US Army, including Reserve and National Guard units, were reported to be generally proactive with recruiting and enrolling immigrant servicemembers in our study.

All of our respondents ultimately came to the US because they or their family saw living in the US as an opportunity for a better life. Some overcame momentous challenges in their immigration journey, and multiple diverse immigrant entry pathways are represented in our sample. Life in America could be complicated by both language and cultural considerations. Respondents who had immigrated as school-age children reported fewer difficulties than those who had come in their late teens or as adults.

English proficiency was paramount for immigrants to acculturate in America, both before and during military service. A participant indicated that there are ESL and non-ESL Army basic training groups, with the US Army trying to ensure that training platoons include a majority or near majority of ESL recruits be placed together in a platoon going through basic training. Several respondents told stories of being in training platoons with co-ethnics or same language speakers and saw this as beneficial to supporting their successful completion of basic training.

The seven guiding values of the US Army introduced to all soldiers in basic training [Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage], were identified by several respondents as an opportunity for the individual to see themselves connected with a larger purpose, and a larger American Army "family". Immigrant service members felt that they embodied these values as members of the military, and they associated them with identifying as an American. All of our respondents came through an established intake training program, such as the Basic Training Course or the Basic Officer Leadership Course, with one commissioned through the Direct Commission Officer Course. None were awarded rank recognition for any prior non-US military service.

Participants overwhelmingly viewed their experience in the US military as positive, and transformative. They were very grateful for the privilege and opportunities the military afforded them, in addition to feeling proud of attaining American citizenship and establishing roots in America for themselves and their families. They reflected on the opportunities for

personal growth, service-connected educational benefits, and ability to serve the country that afforded them a better life.

Regarding discrimination in the US military, participants felt the zero-tolerance policy prohibiting discrimination regarding race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or country of origin, as being effective, and point of consensus and validation. Strong structures and an established culture within the military chain of command quashed instances of racism or discrimination. One participant did detect an underlying racism or prejudice from their point of view, but it was largely kept in check, and the participant felt confident that they could take action to have those addressed if they became problematic. Some participants recounted experiencing more racism or discrimination in civilian life than in the military, although there were still some identified shortcomings, like not having vegetarian or halal meal options. Some participants did have occasional instances where their loyalty was questioned, however usually only upon meeting for the first time, and typically after getting to know their colleagues better, they were no longer being questioned on their loyalty to the US. The case of the US shares some similarities with that of Australia, although with some nuance based on the ADF's significant experience in recruiting lateral transfers.

Australia

As in the US, Australia actively recruits immigrants into its military and they especially favor those with prior service in a foreign military. The majority of our ADF respondents had prior military service in their birth country, mostly in the Commonwealth. Most participants acquired Australian citizenship via their lateral recruit immigration pathway within a few months of entering service. This pathway includes a robust international recruitment process, including in-person interviews in London UK during the second round of selection. Nonetheless, the immigration process is not always well-coordinated between the ADF and visa-issuing authorities, so respondents needed to proactively navigate through the criterion-based processes, variations in processing times, and the impact of citizenship status on access to military resources upon arrival. Participants showcased adaptability and mutual support, especially through previously arrived lateral transfers once in Australia, to navigate through these hurdles.

As with the CAF, prior interactions and collaborations with the Australian armed forces often sparked the idea of pursuing immigration and joining the ADF. Many participants discussed deployment experiences and interactions that shaped their decision, emphasizing the value of international military collaborations for recruiting valuable trained members at middle and higher ranks. For Commonwealth-origin transferees, their narratives emphasized the smoothness of the transition into the ADF, including "swearing the same oath" to the monarch, and the similarities in Regimental structures, with many of them eventually advancing up the ranks in the ADF over time, even though most accepted an initial rank reduction.

Participants desired to contribute meaningfully but encountered institutional barriers, commonly feeling under-utilized and under-appreciated within the ADF. Their experiences show struggles with institutional barriers and misaligned roles, even in a welcoming force. Reflecting on their prior service in their home countries, lateral transfers expressed gratitude for the opportunities received and discussed the utilization of their expertise in the ADF.

They also cited competitive compensation as a positive inducement for remaining in the ADF.

Participants reflected on the presence of gender equity and diversity within the ADF, noting the differences in the representation of women and the acceptance of diverse identities. These insights provide a glimpse into the inclusive environment and the ongoing conversations around gender norms within the ADF military. The reflections of the participants reveal a progressive and inclusive environment, characterized by increased representation of women and acceptance of diverse identities. The observations indicate a balanced gender ratio across various roles and an embracing attitude towards different backgrounds and identities, including transgender and same-sex individuals.

Questions of loyalty were prominent among the participants' experiences, as they navigated their allegiance to their home country and their new commitment to Australia. Some lateral transfers emphasized the sense of belonging to the Commonwealth and did not perceive their move as being disloyal. The security clearance process posed challenges for participants, particularly those who had lived in multiple countries which required more complex documentation and record keeping.

Participants illuminated the complexities around the quest for a unified military identity and adapting to the Australian Army system. This was significant in their narratives, marked by differences in traditions, formalities, and the concept of 'mateship'. This sub-theme explores the cultural nuances of the ADF and the participants' reflections on inclusiveness and innovation. Adapting to the Australian military culture was a mix of challenges and rewards for participants. They valued the ADF's 'mateship' and inclusivity but noted a gap between proclaimed innovation and actual openness to new ideas.

Specifically for lateral transfers in the ADF, the support they received during their move and upon arrival to Australia played a crucial role in their transition and settlement. While they faced issues in housing and adjustment, the camaraderie and guidance from those with similar experiences proved invaluable.

The indoctrination and training at the recruiting stage were pivotal in shaping the participants' integration into the ADF, although there was lack of formal training for lateral transfers. Overall, participants observed disparities in treatment due to their different cultural backgrounds. These insights call for a more consistent and inclusive recruitment approach to optimally harness immigrant soldiers' skills and qualifications.

Comparing the military systems of their home countries and Australia, participants noted differences in personnel retention, rank structure, and cultural norms. These insights emphasize the adaptability needed for immigrant soldiers to blend into the ADF's unique military culture. This need for adaptability came to the forefront as well with the NZDF, which mirrors the ADF in terms of its recruitment appeal to members of the Five Eyes.

New Zealand

Like the US and Australia, New Zealand welcomes into their military non-citizens who hold appropriate work authorization. During our data collection period, New Zealand was actively recruiting Five Eyes servicemembers to join the NZDF, a pathway now suspended.

Similarly to Canada, the immigration documentation and military accession process in New Zealand remained distinctly separate, with no support by the military for lateral transfers going through an expensive and often slow visa process. In common with Australia and Canada, laterally recruited members do not receive any formal indoctrination into the NZDF. The findings emerging from our interviews with immigrants serving in the New Zealand's military show a combination of challenges and positive experiences by our participants.

Participants detailed challenges with the recruiting process, which were generally attributed to communication breakdowns between the NZDF and the immigration department. Applicants incurred numerous expenses involved in completing aspects of their immigration application, including medical, background checks, application fees, and moving their families overseas, which were not fully reimbursed by the NZDF.

Laterally transferred NZDF immigrant soldiers in our study generally had to drop rank upon entering the NZDF, and reported difficulties getting promotions and desired work assignments, even after years of working in New Zealand. Difficulties with promotion were attributed to the NZDF not recognizing their prior experience or qualifications, or to participants' immigrant backgrounds, and suggesting native New Zealanders were prioritized. Additionally, most participants cited the high cost of living, low pay, and poor living conditions as unanticipated surprises in their journey.

In terms of equality and diversity in the New Zealand military, some participants remarked that certain branches consisted of mostly white males, lacking in females and visible minorities. Participants described experiencing some incidents of prejudice and discrimination in military contexts, including recounting some NZDF members blatantly and openly blocking promotion based on country of origin. One participant talked about "racist bullying" experienced by some of his British-born colleagues in the NZDF, and he shared his experience when he was in the British Army and endured racist comments as an Irish soldier serving in the British Army. Other respondents indicated they did not fit in well with New Zealand's locals outside of their military environment, or they experienced discriminatory attitudes.

United Kingdom

While the UK exports lateral transfers, including study respondents in the ADF, NZDF, and CAF, immigrant service members in the UK are dissimilar from those in the other Five Eyes members in some specific ways. The UK allows Commonwealth citizens to serve in their military, opening and closing recruitment windows according to operational needs[4]. In contrast with the US, Australia, and (now) Canada, they do not appear to actively recruit or accept citizens of non-Commonwealth countries, with the special Gurkha Regiment as an exception. All UK respondents in our study immigrated to the UK as children, from Hong Kong, Sudan, New Zealand and Canada. While we did not identify or interview any "lateral transfers" serving in the UK military, it is conceivable that there may be some in their ranks given their skills-based recruitment of Commonwealth citizens.

As with the US, there exist regulations limiting service in terms of years of service or age in the UK military, and that makes it a reliable source of potential experienced mid-career rank recruits for Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. These hard limits to service act as levers to

emigration in military occupations that do not transfer easily into civilian careers. In effect, middle-age lateral transfers from the UK then act as a form of "soft power" connecting the militaries of the Commonwealth back to the former seat of the British Empire.

Initial recruitment training in the UK military was regarded as highly influential in shaping their identities, sense of duty, and in forging relationships that they draw upon throughout their careers, just as it was emphasized by our US cohort. This contrasted with their school experiences, which were particularly difficult for those who immigrated in their teen years with more limited English skills.

In terms of diversity, respondents mentioned Ministry of Defence diversity networks, which are organized groups with the same identity within the ministry of defence, as communities that helped support immigrants in the UK military. Respondents of colour did note that while diversity training and efforts existed, their experiences tended towards subtle forms of racism. One participant in particular attributed invisible discrimination as a factor in him not receiving promotions or mentorship compared to peers who started at the same time or after him; however, the other UK respondents did not identify discrimination as significant to their experience.

Some respondents served in the UK Army during the Troubles[5] and opined that their non-British inflected English (e.g. New Zealand and Canadian accents) made them more useful than some of their mates in the urban warfare circumstances of Northern Ireland. In those instances, the British Army seemed to find their "differences" useful and engaged that in their military activities. In all, the UK military appears to utilize Commonwealth countries as both a source of key labour resources, and as a place to export talent upon expiry of service eligibility, allowing it to maintain influence in the operations of other nation's militaries through the flow of people.

Summary: Lessons and insights for Canada

Our findings reveal that soldiers who were new Canadians learned about the CAF through usual recruitment channels, while lateral transfer soldiers learned about the opportunity through prior connections such during exchanges or deployments, reflecting broader patterns in Five Eyes militaries. This finding reflects how social capital may result in differential outcomes for group members,[6] and the importance of weak social ties in seeking employment opportunities.[7]

Respondents gave varying reasons for moving to Canada including quality of life and safety. They faced some challenges due to socio-cultural differences which hinder integration. Unsurprisingly, most personal social relations for immigrant soldiers, and especially lateral transfers, are within the military. Lateral transfers in the Five Eyes, including in the CAF, identify the lack of an indoctrination program as contributing to maladaptation to the military workplace in the first few years when immigrant soldiers learn from their mistakes, negatively impacting their performance.

A notable failure is the inability of the CAF to maximize the experience and skill set of lateral transfer immigrant soldiers who come to Canada for a second act in their military career. This reflects research by Reitz et. al.[8] who found that immigrant skill underutilization

in Canada keeps growing. In the CAF, the failure to account for the equivalence of training completed by prior service members leads to lower ranks than might be appropriate to their foreign acquired human capital skills. Given the lack of intake training to facilitate the transition of lateral transfer members, the CAF misses an opportunity to inculcate its desired institutional cultural changes with members who will hold middle-rank positions.

Institutional policies such as competence in both of Canada's official languages also contribute to under-utilization of immigrant soldiers' skills. These findings echo prior research that found that the official language policy of the CAF significantly reduces the selection pool for officer promotion and negatively impacts career opportunities for members who have difficulty in learning a second or third language.[9] These challenges could be addressed prior to arrival if lateral recruited potential immigrants are provided early access to language training programs and informed of the relevance to their future career opportunities when recruited into the CAF.

The notion of loyalty was a recurring theme. While immigrant soldiers from Canada's allied countries are normally not questioned about their loyalty to the CAF, immigrant soldiers from other countries face questions about their loyalty, including being called spies or other derogatory labels. These challenges highlight the intersecting and contextualized nature of immigrant soldiers' experiences in the CAF in relation to their country of origin.

Another challenge concerns spouses of immigrant soldiers who have difficulty finding relevant employment due to frequent moves. This finding supports the research by Hergatt Huffman et al. who investigated career progression for military spouses from the perspective of the soldier.[10] Similarly, findings reveal that the military way of life is perceived by immigrant soldiers as a barrier to their spouse's career progression, salient across the Five Eyes.

Based on our findings, we suggest that more systematic support should be provided to facilitate both immigration and integration processes, while opening more opportunities for immigrants in the CAF. The lengthy immigration application process, and lack of communication caused stress and bureaucratic hurdles. Delays in the immigration application, or failure to reach residency requirements for citizenship in a timely manner put immigrant soldiers at a disadvantage. This suggests a need for improved recruitment and accession process for immigrants wishing to join the CAF with better communication and coordination between the CAF and the immigration department.

Having connections to the CAF through previous exchanges is currently a key mechanism for foreign soldiers to identify lateral transfer opportunities in the CAF. This indicates a need to improve the process to support greater diversity in lateral recruitments, as joint postings in the CAF are often filled by male officers. Through a more transparent process, a more diverse pool of talented and skilled lateral transfer candidates could emerge.

Lateral transfer immigrant soldiers also need greater support through their transition into the CAF, and to build their new lives in Canada. Formal indoctrination training for incoming lateral transfer soldiers should be developed and implemented to better integrate them into the CAF and help build their Canadian identities, develop unit cohesion, and drive positive organizational cultural change. Transition support should also be provided to their families, including for employment for spouses.

In working towards changing the culture of the CAF, better training and education incorporating newcomers, including new Canadians and lateral transfers, could support developing new institutional attitudes that build cohesion and morale.

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Endnotes:

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2 Regarding immigrants serving in the CAF we also draw from a previous publication: Scoppio, G., Vieira, A., Baidoo-Anu, D. & Guo, J. (2024). "Immigrants in the Canadian Armed Forces: Second Acts and New Canadians". Journal of Military and Strategic Studies, Vol 23, No. 2 https://jmss.org/article/view/77480

3 In past, the U.S. has sometimes passed legislation to allow to directly recruit immigrants without a legal work status. The most recent example is the MAVNI program (Military Accessions Vital to National Interest) which allowed those with specified skills but without permanent residency to enlist and access an accelerated path to citizenship. It has been paused to new intakes since 2016.

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