

INSPIRING HISTORY

INFO SHEET



Source: <https://bccns.com>

No. 2 Construction Battalion C.E.F.

Whether told bluntly “this is a white man’s war”, or politely that “we’ll call you if we need you”, countless patriotic Black Canadian volunteers were being rejected at recruiting stations at the outbreak of the war in 1914. Bucking a racist bureaucracy that did not want a “checkerboard army”, several black leaders and white supporters lobbied tirelessly to be given the chance to do what they considered their patriotic duty. They made public the humiliation Blacks were suffering, and after the issue was raised in the House of Commons, a change came about. Blacks could join the war effort if they could gather enough men to form a segregated battalion.

Enlisted with over 300 men from Nova Scotia, were 350 men from Ontario (with 60 from Toronto alone), 50 from Western Canada, and a 165 American recruits. Together, they formed the No. 2 Construction Battalion on July 5, 1916.

This was Canada’s first and only black battalion, and it was also the only volunteer unit to engage in non-combatative work before proceeding overseas: mainly lifting rails from the Grand Trunk sidings in areas of New Brunswick, such as Moncton, Nappadogan, and Edmunston.

On March 25, 1917, the Battalion embarked from Halifax on the troopship *Southland*. As it was “three hundred under strength”, the No. 2 Battalion was reorganized into a construction company and detailed into working parties where they were digging trenches for the troops in training in England, and repairing roads within the bounds of the Canadian command.

In 1917, the Battalion was attached to the Canadian Forestry Corps, departing for France on May 17. Upon arrival on May 21, in La Joux, Jour Mountains, they assisted in logging, milling and shipping operations, as well as repairing roads and relaying water supplies.

On April 3, 1918 the Battalion, made up of men who excelled in their work, was recommended to transfer to the Western Front. The war ended shortly thereafter, and the troops left for Canada in January of 1919.

A letter was received by Major Daniel Sutherland, a railroad contractor and resident of River John, N.S., who had volunteered to lead the Battalion. It conveyed thanks from the commander of the Canadian Forestry Corps to the No. 2 Battalion for its valuable and faithful service.

In 1986, the Black Cultural Society published *Canada’s Black Battalion: No.2 Construction C.E.F.* by the late Senator Calvin W. Ruck. At the book launching it

was suggested that the Market Wharf of Pictou, N.S., the site of the Battalion’s first headquarters, be declared a national historic site. And on July 9, 1993 this became a reality when the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada worked in conjunction with the Black Cultural Society to make a recommendation that was accepted by the Government of Canada.

The former mayor of Pictou, His Worship Lawrence LeBlanc, requested that the Black Cultural Society hold a ceremony at the site on an annual basis.

Now stands a monument in Pictou dedicated to all those who served in the No.2 Construction Battalion in WWI. Lest we forget.

