

# No. 2 Construction Battalion C.E.F. Pride, Prejudice and Perseverance

By John Boileau



When the First World War broke out, Canadian black men wanted to serve their country by joining the armed forces as their fellow whites did, but faced a long uphill battle. In spite of official Canadian government policy—which clearly stated black volunteers could be accepted—many suffered rejection.

After two years of perseverance and tireless lobbying by black community leaders—assisted by supportive whites—the government authorized a black unit, allowing patriotic blacks an opportunity to serve King and Country.

The black population of Canada at the time numbered about 20,000, with some 7,000 in Nova Scotia. Because of this, the army chose this province as the location of No. 2 Construction Battalion, formed on July 5, 1916, with headquarters at Pictou.

Construction units built and repaired trenches, roads, bridges and railways, among other tasks. No. 2 Construction Battalion became the first and only black unit ever established in the Canadian armed forces.

Although made up of blacks, the officers were white, with one notable exception. The unit chaplain, the Rev. Dr. William White, became one of a handful of black officers in the entire British Empire during the First World War.

No. 2 Construction Battalion recruited across Canada, making it a truly national unit. The initial response saw many young blacks, several still in their teens, volunteering throughout the country. About 200 recruits came from the United States and the British West Indies.

Nevertheless, the battalion did not reach its authorized strength of 1,049 all ranks. There are many possible reasons for this. Although blacks now had their own unit, the segregated nature of the battalion and its non-combatant status understandably upset some of them. Previous experience with rejection may have dissuaded others from trying to enlist again.

Several blacks who joined the unit felt, “The army let us join, but wouldn't let us fight. They gave us shovels, not rifles.”

Eventually half the unit—about 300 men—came from Nova Scotia. Despite being under strength, the unit sailed to England in March 1917, where it reorganized as a 600-man company. In May, No. 2 Construction Company crossed the English Channel to France, where it spent the rest of the war in the Jura Mountains, near the Swiss border.

Soldiers of the units assisted Canadian Forestry Corps companies in logging, milling and shipping. During the First World War, lumber was a much more critical commodity than in later wars, used for trenches, duckboards, huts and many other items.

After providing valuable and faithful service to their country, the soldiers returned to Halifax in 1919, where the unit was disbanded in 1920. Canada's first and only black military unit was no more.