

Honour before Glory: Canada's Black Battalion

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Nine years ago, in this place, I shared with you some of what I'd learned about the history of Afro-Canadians. Coming from the States five years before, it was a voyage of discovery. Some of what I learned was grimly familiar—Canada has not been immune to the toxins of slavery, racism, segregation, broken promises, marginalisation and exclusion. Far from it. But I learned, as well, stories that portrayed a landscape occasionally turned upside down to the eyes of someone who'd migrated North from below the 49th parallel.

For example, the stories of black Loyalists--tens of thousands of women, men and their families fled plantations and houses of servitude to serve the British cause in the War of Independence. They rallied to the Union Jack because of the promise made to them that their service would be rewarded with their freedom. For thousands, it was a promise kept. I shared with you, as well, the tale of the 800 people of colour who boarded the steamship "The Commodore" in San Francisco Bay and set sail for Victoria and their freedom in 1858.

I talked about Fred Herzog's extraordinary documentary photographs of Vancouver in the 50s and 60s—a Vancouver more working class, a port town, full of colour, with residents of colour. Of black men working on ships, a man walking with his daughter dressed in their Sunday best, of a mixed race couple out on a date at the PNE totally at their ease, at rest, at work, at peace. Musing on his father's decision to move from the States and settle down here, Wayne Compton said: "I think part of it...was going to a place where the scripts around blackness

weren't so solid. They weren't all laid out. That's not to say there wasn't racism...But I think it *was* different...there was some breathing space here.”

While preparing for that sermon years ago, and this often happens, I come across stories and there just isn't time to fit them in—one of those stories is the formation of the all-black No. 2 Construction Battalion that served this nation in World War I—something I learned about reading Calvin Ruck's book from 1987 called *The Black Battalion: Canada's Best Kept Military Secret*. So today, I'm going to talk about the No. 2 Construction Battalion; I think it's a story worth sharing on this first Sunday of Black History Month.

But first, as I have worshipped with you in Remembrance Day services, there have been times when I've been deeply moved and felt absorbed into the collective, affective landscape of our nation—all the while wanting, as well, to speak out and say: What waste! What tragedy! What a failure of imagination, diplomacy, leadership, patience and compassion! And World War I!—can someone tell me what *that* was about?! And was it really necessary—the price we thought we had to pay in order for Canada to become a truly independent nation? That's what written in many of our popular history books. *That's* the symbolic message being conveyed on the reverse side of our recently re-designed \$20 bills; Bill Reid's “Jade Boat” was replaced with the Vimy Ridge Memorial. Is *that* what it takes to become a nation? Is *that* what it takes to become a “man”?

We're far enough away now from Remembrance Day, and its unique demands, for me to feel like I can ask these questions with you, that—and removed from ritual and poetic abstraction about war—to consider a more fine-grained, realistic reckoning. Unsurprisingly, the medium for this reckoning comes to us through the bodies of black Canadian men.

I'm aware of the fact that I am a white man who's tasked himself to talk about a chapter in the history of Afro-Canadians in recognition of Black History month. Given my white body, there's no way I can speak about *this* from lived experience anymore than I could speak as an old man about the lived experience of women, their reproductive choices and reproductive justice. But there are times, nonetheless, when men must step forward as allies to women, and when a privileged white man must step forward to tell, as best I can, Black men's history. It is as simple, as complicated, and as necessary as that. It must be done, no matter what. I do it as well, having recently spoken with a UU minister in the States who told me that five times the "Black Lives Matter" sign his UU congregation posted on their grounds had been defaced and finally burned to the ground.

So here's the setting: it's Autumn 1915. The "war to end all wars" is going badly: unprecedented, bloody stalemate in the West, Russia floundering in the East, the Allied attempt to open a third, southern front in Turkey a disaster. Canadians had responded to the call to fight for King and Country with enthusiasm, waves of volunteers and subsequent, grievous losses. The dread prospect of conscription looms. From the outset of hostilities, black Canadian men, from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, stepped forward to serve, only to be rejected at one recruiting office after another. Some officials bluntly told Black recruits, that this was a "white man's war." In other instances, they said, "We'll call you when we need you." In western Nova Scotia, Blacks often heard, "We don't want a chequer-board army."

Black leaders and individuals throughout the country began to protest the exclusion of Black volunteers. For example, four months after the war started, Arthur Alexander from Buxton, Ontario, wrote a letter to Sir Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia and Defense, stating:

“The colored people of Canada want to know why they are not allowed to enlist...I am informed ...they have been refused for no other apparent reason that their color, as they are physically and mentally fit [to serve].” Military officials claimed that selection was entirely in the hands of commanding officers and are not the responsibility of Military headquarters.

But here’s what things looked like across the country close up, and in the eyes of local commanding officers in 1914-15. From Victoria, a Colonel Ogilvie, wrote to Ottawa: “In British Columbia, the colour line [is] very sharply drawn...It is most inadvisable that...coloured men should be enlisted into the same units as white men....The universal opinion is that if this were allowed it would do much harm, as white men here will not serve in the same ranks with...coloured persons.” (* See endnotes)

“The universal opinion...the colour line is very sharply drawn here,” wrote Colonel Ogilvie of Victoria, BC. That’s what happens, the infection that sets in, after centuries of Empire; that what happens, the rot that sets in after more than a century of craven pseudo-science that classified races in a totally fallacious ladder of so-called ascent from inferior to superior whose *true project* was enabling and justifying the colonial and imperial presumptions of European and North American whites. Birds know nothing of national borders, and Jim Crow—the violent ideology and practice of racist segregation—I am sorry to say—flew North (and West over the Atlantic), and came home to roost in our home and native land.

Well, a year and half after the War began scores of able men had been turned away from enlisting in the military. It was not until Allied casualties reached crippling numbers that Canadians on both sides of the colour line began to push back in earnest. Black Canadians were in the forefront. J.R.B Whitney, publisher of the *Canadian Observer*, a newspaper Whitney

described as the “official organ of the Coloured Race in Canada,” offered to raise a unit of troops and pressured military authorities to attach it to regular Expeditionary forces. “I have published a call for recruits,” he wrote. “Many have responded to the call, and are eagerly waiting to be uniformed in the King’s colours. The Race as a whole is looking forward to the outcome. I trust that” we will see it happen, “otherwise there will be a great disappointment...”

William Pugsley, former Premier of New Brunswick, and MP for St. John, asked on the floor of House of Commons, if any steps had been taken toward Black enlistment or the formation of a Black regiment. He reported that representations had been made by citizens of New Brunswick and Ontario numerous times to this end. “There is a good deal of complaint,” Pugsley told the House, “and a very considerable amount of feeling among our coloured citizens that they have not been treated fairly. They have been told that their services would be accepted, and when they have gone to the recruiting office they were told to go away without receiving any satisfaction.”

And finally, this extract from a letter to Sir Sam Hughes, Minister of Defense, from John T. Richards of St John:

“Honourable Sir: On behalf of St John’s colored residents...some 20 of our colored Men tried to enlist but were turned down. On arrival at the office they were met by the Commanding Officer and told to get right away from there as he would not have them at all, in fact insulted them. ...Nothing has been done for these people by the Military here; it is a downright shame and an insult to the Race, the way our people have been used.... I believe you will right this wrong. I wish you would have this matter cleared up at your earliest moment and issue a general order that [we] shall not be discriminated against....Yours ‘for a square deal for each and all’
John T. Richards, 274 Prince William Street”

Finally, after almost two years of contradictions and indecision over the issue, military leaders finally relented, in part, to public pressure and the growing crisis of the War. The Chief of the General Staff recommended permitting individual Blacks to enlist in white battalions at the

discretion of commanding officers—something that ended up happening rarely indeed. He further recommended the formation of a segregated labour battalion—a recommendation the British War Office accepted May 11, 1916.

Within months, the No.2 Construction Battalion, the first and only Black battalion in Canadian military history, was formed under the command of Lt. Col. Daniel Sutherland, a former railroad contractor from River John, NS. By December 1916, Sutherland heard from Ottawa that the battalion was needed overseas as soon as possible. Recruits stepped forward from across Canada, the West Indies and the United States. By March 1917, the Battalion had nineteen officers, including the Rev. Captain William Andrew White—the first black officer ever in the British Army who would serve as Battalion chaplain—and 605 men in other ranks. On March 28, they embarked for England on their way to France. After having volunteered and tried to enlist to serve for over two years, after having been told time and again to wait—those men sailed on a segregated ship during the ten days of World War I that saw the heaviest submarine activity in the North Atlantic.

The men of the No 2 Construction Battalion were sent to the woods of the Jura Mountains in France near the Swiss border where they were attached to the Canadian Forestry Corps of Canadian Expeditionary Forces. As a construction battalion, their duties involved all aspects of forestry production. Teams of men worked the forests year-round, selecting and harvesting mature timber that was transported by draft horses and narrow gauge railways. They cut down, milled and loaded lumber for railroad ties, bridges and pickets, beams and boards for military camp and trench construction. As well, they laid tracks and strung barbed wire close to enemy lines.

They worked in heavy snows in the winter and near tropical heat in the summer. This was manual labour with pick and shovel, axe and two-man crosscut and rip saws. Private John Smith from Middleton, NS, recalled: “at times, it was pretty good; at other times, well, it was just bad and lonely. But I have no regrets. It was a real learning experience.” Private A. Benjamin Elms from Monastery, NS, said: “We loaded lumber and shipped it to the front lines. We had two or three mills going night and day. I preferred working with the night crew—I was nineteen, in the prime of life—and the meals at night were a lot better.” Private Elms also had fond memories of the French people in the nearby towns of Salins and Champagnole—“They were different from the people here in Canada. *They* treated us with respect.”

I was able to track down the official war diary of the Construction Battalion from Military Archives. Most of the entries are terse reports on weather conditions, occasional disciplinary measures, and the frequent coming and goings of officers. Some, however, stand out. In March 1918, the Battalion diary reported a record production in both timber tonnage and “fbm”—foot board measure of lumber: “107,000 fbm hardwood in a 10 hour shift with old type Canadian mill with no improvements. This is a world’s record.”

Sundays featured “divine services” at 10 a.m. led by Rev. Captain White. On July 1, 1918, the Diary reads: “Dominion Day. #2 Construction paraded to the grounds. During the Day, the Band of this Company, by their excellent music, including national anthems and a programme, greatly assisted in entertaining the crowds and making the holiday a memorable success.” This reminds me of the reminiscence of Edith Colley of Dartmouth, NS who saw the Battalion parade through the town in March 1917. Leading the way was the Battalion Brass Band led by Sgt. George Stewart.

“It was a lovely Spring Day,” she wrote, “when they came marching down Ochterloney Street. I was only a girl, but I can still remember that day. The Band was playing ‘The Colonel Bogey March.’ The soldiers looked so smart. Their buttons and boots were shining, and they were marching proudly and so straight. It was a picture to behold, and splendid! A day or two later, they all sailed away for France. I’ll never forget that parade as long as I live.”

August 2, 1918. “On account of the drought,” reads the Diary, “bathing is restricted to one day per week—Saturday.” September 26, 1918 “Kit inspection. Parade at 6:30 pm for Red Cross Comforts—cigarettes and tobacco sent by the Montreal Gazette Company.”

And these two entries noting the official inspections by some top brass: July 7, 1918 —“the interior economy... of the camp was favourably commented upon.” “The companies assembled,” reads the entry for October 31, 1918. “Lt Gen. Sir Richard Thorne complimented the men of the Forestry Corps on the splendid work done by them and pointed out the necessity of continuing in the selfsame spirit in order to bring this war to a victorious end.”

There’s that word again: *splendid*. There was something about those men. A young Nova Scotia girl sees them on parade in their hundreds, marveled and never forgot the sight. And the General, a year and half later, deep in the woods of the Jura mountains, reviewing the #2 Construction Battalion, their heroic labour, their service and record lumber production, the interior economy and order of the camp—the six hundred Canadian men arrayed before him—and the same word: *splendid*.

It’s decades later, 1982; the two dozen surviving veterans of the #2 were honoured back in Nova Scotia at the Lord Nelson Hotel in Halifax. There was musical entertainment, door prizes, a banquet, certificates of honour, and numerous official greetings and speeches. I want to end by quoting from one of those speeches. Edmund Morris, had been mayor of Halifax, and was then serving as Minister for Social Services for the Province. Morris, a white guy and

provincial Tory, was invited to deliver the keynote address because the audience knew he had been an ally to both the black residents of Halifax and to neighbouring First Nations.

“We have come together,” Morris said, “to honour Black veterans who served in World War I... It is a curiosity and an irony...but it is a fact, that *they were not wanted*...

Yet the spirit that resided in them, the energy and the courage, defined as grace under pressure, inspired them to serve on behalf of their people, their country, and their monarch, believing that those things they had inherited from the past would give way to a brighter day. These are our valiant men...And we ask, in our own way, to be forgiven for having overlooked your contribution. But, alas, we have had our eyes opened [very late] and [now] see more deeply than ever before, with what valour, what brotherhood, and with what hope our Black brothers helped to purchase our freedom. To these veterans, brothers, whose blood is the same colour as my blood, who were prepared to give it, who served and fought, who lived and dwelled among us—to these veterans, brothers, ring out brave trumpets, sing out proud Province, honour Black men of valour.

(All quotes from Calvin W. Ruck, *The Black Battalion: 1916-1920: Canada's Best Kept Military Secret*, 1987; and War Diary of the #2 Construction Battalion.)

**The following quotes were too vile for me to read out loud in the sermon. Nevertheless, they're worth printing here to underline how deep racism ran in white Canada and, thus, the resistance to men of colour serving in the military as equals to whites in the opening decades of the 20th Century.*

From Halifax, this from Lt. Col. W. H. Allen, Commanding 106th Overseas Battalion addressed to Division Authorities and the Quartermaster General:

Sirs: several white men who had been about to sign on refused if coloured men were to be admitted into the Regiment. Personally, I think that coloured men should do their share in the Empire's defense...and believe some would make good soldiers. Still, I would prefer white men, and if the enlistment of coloured men is going to prevent better men from signing on, it seems to me that the best thing to do would be to keep them separated....Neither my men nor myself, would care to sleep alongside them, or to eat with them, especially in hot weather. A white man's appetite is a peculiar thing. I trust some solution may be found by which the services of coloured men may be utilized. (December 9, 1915)

Four months after that execrable letter, and almost exactly one hundred years ago today, came this Memorandum, from Major General Gwatkin, Chief of the General Staff under the heading: “Enlistment of Negroes in Canadian Expeditionary Forces”:
In Canada, the negro is vain and imitative. He is not impelled to enlist by a high sense of duty; in the trenches he is not likely to make a good fighter; and the average white man will not associate with him in terms of equality. Not a single commanding officer...is willing to accept a coloured platoon as part of his Battalion. In France, in the firing line, there is no place for a black unit...It would be eyed askance and difficult to reinforce. (April 13, 1916)