Black Soldiers in a White Man's War

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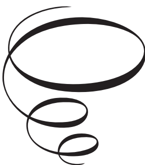
Race, Good Order and Discipline in a Great War Labour Battalion

By

Gordon Douglas Pollock

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0779-3
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0779-1

One would expect people to remember the past and to imagine the future. But in fact, when discoursing or writing about history, they imagine it in terms of their own experience, and when trying to gauge the future they cite supposed analogies from the past: till, by a double process of repetition, they imagine the past and remember the future.

Lewis Bernstein Namier, "Symmetry and Repetition"
Manchester Guardian, 1 January 1941

The accepted description of the Irish in the United States is not derived from an exegesis of the data by historians, but is the product of eisagesis. That is, it is not the result of a reading-out of meaning inherent in the historical data, but of a reading-in of meaning derived from beliefs, values, and attitudes totally external to the available historical evidence.

Donald Harmon Akenson
Being Had: Historians, Evidence and the Irish in North America, 1985

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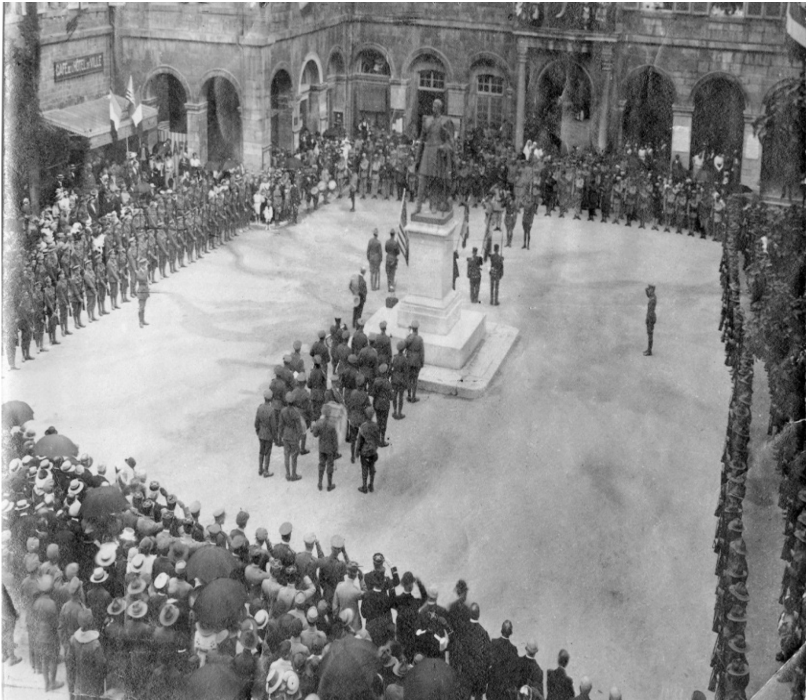
THE BAND OF NO. 2 CONSTRUCTION COMPANY
BASTILLE DAY, 14 JULY 1918

Allied Formations in the Square before the Hôtel de Ville,
Salins-les-Bains, Jura, France



Excerpt from War Diary, No. 2 Canadian Construction Company, 14 July 1918

The Mayor of Salins invited the Canadians in this District to send a Detachment to Salins to take part in a Review in which American and French troops were participating. Major Sutherland represented Lieutenant Col. G.M. Strong, DSO, OC No 5 District, CFC, who was absent on duty, and acted as Reviewing Officer of the Allied Troops at Salins commemorating the National Day and to do honour to the French Republic. The Band of this Coy under the leadership of Sergeant G.W. Stewart played the National Anthems and a programme and greatly assisted in making the event a memorable one.

Photograph Courtesy of Colonel D. H. Sutherland's Family

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When one concludes any project, one realizes the extent of contributions of others: librarians, archivists, fellow scholars, friends and family. All have added to the mix.

I want to thank the staff of Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa for their assistance and in taking a leadership role in digitizing a record collection significant to the nation's culture. In Halifax, thanks go to the staff of the Nova Scotia Archives, in particular to Garry Shutlack, who for decades has been a source of wisdom about the province he serves. I am grateful also to Clyde Forsberg, Jr. for encouraging me to stay the course. I also must acknowledge a great debt to Klaus Hansen, formerly of Queen's University at Kingston, who taught intending historians to think beyond boundaries.

For many years my four children have tolerated a distracted father; thank you Jennifer, Fiona, Caitlin and Liam. Dorothy Atkinson Harrison, who presides calmly over this family, knows how much she has added to this project in thoughtful criticism and grammatical clarity. Any remaining errors are mine alone.

In Canada there is a presence observable in virtually all areas of culture, with much research and writing supported financially by at least one government agency. I am delighted to report that no such funding has been sought or received in the execution of this project.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BATTALION: IN PLACE OF MYTH

In July of 1916, just four days after the bloody opening of the Somme offensive on the Western Front, the Canadian government agreed to recruit Black volunteers to serve in what became No. 2 Construction Battalion. At the urging of the unit's Commanding Officer, the battalion's intended role was to lay track and maintain railways alongside the men of No. 1 Construction Battalion, a unit composed of soldiers of European extraction.[1] With No. 2's arrival in England, however, military Command hesitated to commit Black troops to such duty, fearing "the moral effect of mixing these men with whites."[2] Rejected even as a Labour Battalion,

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[1] No. 1 Construction Battalion had been established in April of 1916. That unit was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Blair Ripley, a senior engineer with the Canadian Pacific Railway. Like No. 2, No. 1 was allowed to recruit across Canada. Unlike No. 2, whose target recruitment group was men of African origin, No. 1's enlistment strategy was tightly defined, seeking primarily "skilled and experienced railway men who also undertook general construction work." See *Guide to Sources Relating to Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, Canadian Railway Troops*, 7. http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/005/f2/005-1142.29.014-e.pdf, accessed 11 February 2017. No. 1 Construction Battalion, composed entirely of White volunteers, sailed from Halifax in mid-September 1916. In France by December of that year, it was re-designated the 1st Battalion Canadian Railway Troops.

[2] "Originally intended for Canadian Railway Troops as per authority AG 29-1-2 March 26th, 1917, but owing to the moral effect of mixing these men with whites . . . they were sent to the Forestry Corps." See Headquarters of Canadian Railway Troops in France, Selected Documents, 4472, File 2, Folder 3, Summary of Mobilization of all CRT Units, 84, Library and Archives Canada, hereafter LAC. In this same record set there is reference to the cancellation of No. 2 Construction Battalion's move to Purfleet, the Depot of Canadian Railway Troops. No date is given for this cancellation, but movement listings are arranged chronologically with the preceding unit movement dated 17 March 1917 and the next dated-movement 7 April 1917. Thus, one assumes the order rescinding movement to Purfleet was issued subsequent to 17 March and prior to 7 April 1917, the latter

"H.Q. not approving of them being formed into Labour Companies", nevertheless, when deployed, those Black soldiers, a labour battalion in all but name, sweated in the forests of France alongside men of the Canadian Forestry Corps.[3] Although relations between White and Black troops in the forests were not without difficulties, it would seem Black labourers avoided morally contaminating these lumbermen in khaki.[4] Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Sutherland, the battalion's Commanding Officer, joked at the unit's first post-war reunion that his troops had done so well in forestry production that the "Canadian Forestry Corps became attached to No. 2."[5] Despite such light-hearted banter, that early rebuff remained a vexing issue with Sutherland throughout the war.

Not the only men of African descent in Canada's armed forces during the Great War,[6] nevertheless No. 2's volunteers became central actors in a

being the day prior to No. 2's arrival at Liverpool, England. See Summary of Units Moving through Depot, 118.

[3] Summary of Mobilization of all CRT Units, 84.

[4] Daniel H. Sutherland, Commanding Officer of No. 2, consistently but unsuccessfully pressed Command to honour its original commitment and re-designate the battalion as a railway construction unit. Technically not one of Canada's four Labour Battalions during the Great War, the men of No. 2 Construction Battalion nonetheless functioned as military labourers throughout their time in England and France.

[5] Calvin Ruck cites without contradiction a report carried in the Halifax *Mail Star* of 13 November 1982 indicating the 1982 reunion was "the first and perhaps the only reunion of Black First World War veterans." It clearly was not. Calvin Ruck, *Canada's Black Battalion: No. 2 Construction, 1916–1920, (*Halifax, Nova Scotia: Black Cultural Centre, 1986), 43. Colonel Sutherland's remarks to the first reunion of his battalion are found in a typescript of an address made by him to the first reunion of No. 2 Construction Battalion, undated but letterhead on which it is typed indicates it was given as a speech sometime during the 1920s. Daniel H. Sutherland Papers, Army Museum, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

[6] There were Black soldiers scattered among Canada's Great War battalions. Major Mathias Joost concluded his "No. 2 Construction Battalion: The Operational History" suggesting a broader representation than these relatively few men and the soldiers of No. 2. In his final footnote, he reports: "No. 2 Construction Battalion was not the only all-black unit created in the First World War. The author has discovered at least one other unit composed of black soldiers and white officers that participated in the war in Europe. Further research is being conducted to gather the required information on the unit's officers, men, and activities." We shall await the results of his further research. See Mathias Joost, "No. 2 Construction Battalion: The Operational History", *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (Summer 2016): footnote 58, 59.

powerful cultural myth, seeded a century ago and celebrated since that time in folk tale, poetry, film and text. In popular imagination they have been posted to the frontlines where they were subjected to mustard gas attacks and employed in "defusing land mines, so advancing troops could move forward, and bringing out the wounded."[7] "Black sweat and toil had beat the Hun," a poet proclaimed.[8] Through all, Calvin Ruck, author of *Canada's Black Battalion: No. 2 Construction, 1916–1920,* the volume that brought the battalion to public notice, assured us, "They performed their assigned tasks willingly and without question."[9] Compelling imagery certainly, but far from reality.

The battalion began with high hopes, with Colonel Sutherland enthusiastic about recruitment during the summer of 1916. Like other Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) battalions, No. 2 was to consist of four Companies, plus Headquarters. Sutherland believed two of those Companies, each composed of 250 NCOs and men, could be raised in Canada's Maritime Provinces, with an additional Company formed of men from Ontario, with a fourth comprising volunteers from the Canadian west.[10] Such plans were soon found impractical. By November of 1916 Colonel Sutherland was so concerned about lagging recruitment that he attempted unsuccessfully to persuade Major General W. E. Hodgins, Canada's Acting Adjutant General, to allow him to recruit in the British West Indies.[11] Perhaps reacting to Canada's racist attitudes or reflecting misgivings about the war in general, the battalion's recruitment faltered across the country, failing by a large margin to raise its authorized strength of 1,049 officers, NCOs and men. During the nine months between the battalion's formation and its departure for England, some 670 volunteers came forward.

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[7] Original form of this myth appeared in the Halifax *Herald*, 23 January 1919. For later iterations, see *Toronto Star*, 14 November 1982 and Historica.ca, blackhistorycanada.ca, http://www.blackhistorycanada.ca/events.php?themeid=21&id=8, accessed 7 July 2016.

[8] George Borden, "Black Soldier's Lament" in *I Never Heard Their Cry! Selected Poems of George Borden* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013)

[9] Ruck, *Canada's Black Battalion:* 82.

[10] Sutherland to DAA and QMG, MD No. 6, Halifax, 26 August 1916, RG 24, vol. 4558, file 132-11-1, LAC, cited in Ruck, *Canada's Black Battalion*, 24.

[11] Sutherland to Hodgins, 27 November 1916, RG 24, vol. 1550, File 683-124-2, LAC, cited in Ruck, *Canada's Black Battalion*, 25.

Recruits from eastern Canada underwent basic training first at Pictou, Nova Scotia, then at Truro, a base some sixty kilometres to the west. Volunteers from Canada's central and western provinces and the vast majority of American recruits trained at Windsor, Ontario. The unit was together in Truro for approximately a fortnight before sailing for service overseas, too brief a period to build group loyalty and battalion pride.[12] With ranks thinned by medical discharges and desertions, the remaining 605 troops travelled to Halifax, boarding the *Southland*, a converted passenger liner, and set sail for Liverpool, England on 25 March 1917.[13] Of the departing troops, 346 were Canadian-born.[14]

When one strips away the mythology that has grown around No. 2, its bibliography is slim: Calvin Ruck's volume written thirty years ago; six pages in a post-war summary of Nova Scotia's military units; references in

[12] Citing the appendix to the unit's War Diary, dated 17 May 1917, Calvin Ruck reported the battalion mobilized at Truro on 17 March 1917. Newspaper reports from Windsor, Ontario indicate men of that detachment departed that city by rail on 6 March 1917. If, in fact, the War Diary is correct, it would suggest an eleven day journey from Windsor to Truro, a most unlikely railway schedule, even in wartime. See War Diaries of No. 2 Canadian Construction Company (Coloured), RG 9 III-D-3 Volume 5015, Appendix 1: Boulogne 1917, May 17th, LAC and *The Evening Record*, 6 March 1917, Windsor, Ontario.

[13] The unit's War Diary and Stuart Hunt indicate the *Southland* sailed on 25 March 1917. See M.S. Hunt's, *Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War,* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia Veteran's Publishing Co., 1919), 309. However, the Nominal Roll of Officers, NCOs and Men gave the date of embarkation as 28 March 1917. Although 605 NCOs and Other Ranks boarded the transport, five of these men were White. With the exception of Battalion Sergeant Major James P. Norman and Regimental Quarter Master Sergeant George S. Peacock, the remaining White soldiers were transferred to other units on arriving in England. See Nominal Roll of Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men, Canadian Expeditionary Force, No. 2 Construction Battalion, MG 23, vol. 29, #96, Nova Scotia Archives, hereafter NSA.

[14] In addition to Canadian-born troops, 171 had been born in the USA, 69 were natives of the British West Indies, and the remainder from other countries or no information on birth was carried on the battalion's Nominal Roll. The majority of men from the West Indies were resident in Canada on enlistment. See Nominal Roll, No. 2 Construction Battalion. One must also consider that many volunteers to the CEF were not born in Canada either. Chris Sharpe estimates that 45.5 of all volunteers to the CEF were Canadian-born; thus, volunteers to No. 2 exceeded by a generous percentage the rate of Canadian-born volunteers to the CEF. See Chris Sharpe, "Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918", *Canadian Military History*, Volume 24, Issue 1 (2015), Table X, 42.

an article on war-time recruitment; a chapter in an academic publication; two university theses; and most recently, a brief review of the unit's operational history.[15] There is little, however, in these texts to bring to life those Black soldiers who served in England and France between April of 1917 and the early months of 1919. A century later their stories have still not been told.

To find the men of No. 2 one must troll through military records conserved at Library and Archives Canada. These documents quickly shatter a central assumption about the unit's troops.[16] Apart from their dark skins and their understanding of how that defined them in contemporary society, No. 2's volunteers shared little in common. Country boys and city slickers, they had come from villages, towns, farms and teeming urban centres across North America and the Caribbean. Many were illiterate, with a handful of university students scattered among them.

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[15] The bibliography is indeed brief: Calvin Ruck, *Canada's Black Battalion,* (an edition was published by Nimbus Press of Halifax the following year under the title of *The Black Battalion: 1916-1920, Canada's Best Kept Secret*); StuartHunt's, *Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War;* James Walker "Race and Recruitment in World War 1: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force", *Canadian Historical Review*, LXX, 1, 1989; John G. Armstrong, ''The Unwelcome Sacrifice: A Black Unit in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1917-19" in *Ethnic Armies: Polyethnic Armed Forces from the Time of the Habsburgs to the Age of the Superpowers* (Waterloo Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1990); and Mathias Joost, "No. 2 Construction Battalion: The Operational History". Two university theses using Ruck's material as a launching pad for investigating No. 2 are Sean Flynn Foyn's Master of Arts thesis completed at the University of Ottawa, "The Underside of Glory: Africanadian Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917" (2000), which provides some biographcal details of recruits as well as excoriating Canadian recruiting policy, and Danielle Pittman's Honours undergraduate thesis completed at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, "Moving Mountains: The No. 2 Construction Battalion and African Canadian Experience During the First World War" (2012).

[16] The noted literary critic Terry Eagleton subtlety raises warning flags about documentation. Writing about hegemony, an inclusive control system, he notes it is more than psychological; it is, he says, "also a question of economic incentives and social techniques, religious practices and electoral routine." Documents can be viewed as part of these techniques, a recording made by those who exercise power, in the case of military courts-martial on which I rely, the power structure inherent in military formations. Only the most naive student of history, however, mistakes text for objective reality; one need not be a postmodernist to treat documents with utmost care. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish History*, (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 28.

Shy, boisterous, shrewd, naive, urbane, pious and profane, all types were found in their ranks. A significant number were rebellious, indifferent to military discipline; some were contemptuous of those who were their comrades at arms. Close your eyes to their skin tones and they mirrored in some ways all volunteers to Canada's forces. Despite this reality, No. 2 Construction Battalion's volunteers were different: they were Black soldiers in what many believed was a White man's war.

Documents not easily available when Calvin Ruck assembled his account are now readily accessible. Canada's national archive has digitised attestation papers for every member of the CEF. Through these documents, completed prior to enlistment, we meet the battalion's volunteers; learn where they were born, where they lived prior to enlistment, see their physical characteristics, note their religious denominations and occupations. Of even greater importance, that archive is midway through digitizing service records of every member of the Canadian forces who served during the Great War. These documents are the grit in which gold is discovered: details of soldiers' postings, their health, their promotions, their pay, and significantly, their conduct.

This study rests on the analysis of service records of 587 volunteers to No. 2, 537 of whom served abroad. A method untried by previous investigators, it has provided unparalleled insights into these soldiers' lives during the war years, those who offended military codes of conduct and those who, no doubt grumbling, did their duty. Despite enhanced knowledge about these men, nevertheless we still do not know why they agreed to serve; their army records are silent on this. Some unquestionably hoped to prove their manhood. Restlessness of youth drove other volunteers, a search for adventure, or an escape from everyday civilian life. Some saw in the army a steady wage with room and board, others a flight from domestic or civil entanglements. There was probably also a desire to demonstrate a commitment to King and Country, except, of course, almost one-third of the volunteers had no King and owed allegiance to another country, the United States of America.

Unquestionably this was an international battalion composed of Canadians, Americans and men from the British West Indies. Regardless of where they called home, these volunteers were at war and the Crown demanded their total commitment. Promising to defend His Majesty against all enemies, a Black soldier, like all who served in the CEF, swore an oath "to observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and

Successors, and all the Generals and Officers set over me."[17] Having no contact with the King and very few, if any, with Generals, documents nonetheless demonstrate that many of No. 2's volunteers had serious reservations about obeying those set over them. Battalion service records contain frequent charges of insubordination, failure to obey orders and threatening superior officers. Some in the unit turned their aggression inwards, against their comrades. They appeared to be at war with them rather than Germans, who for the vast bulk of volunteers were a distant, almost invisible force.

The battalion's conduct was indeed striking. During their time in uniform one man in every three in the unit was judged guilty of offences serious enough to be confined to detention cells or, if posted to France, awarded Field Punishment No. 1. Known by the troops as crucifixion, when not doing manual labour or pack drill, prisoners were bound to a wagon wheel for extended periods.[18] A more serious indication of indiscipline, thirty-five members of the battalion, one in every twenty, were court-martialled, charged with breaches of military or civil codes. A number of these men received lengthy prison terms and three were sentenced to death.[19] This record was significant. When placed in a comparative context, such a rate of grave disorder was almost double that recorded in the 22nd Battalion,

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[17] Oath to Be Taken by Man on Attestation, found in Attestation Paper, a document signed by every volunteer to the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

[18] This punishment consisted of being tied to a wagon wheel or a post for two hours a day, three days out of four. When not thus restrained, prisoners were compelled to do hard labour, pack drill and other time-consuming and tiresome tasks. Teresa Iacabelli dismisses the significance of this punishment, given the number of men who repeatedly were sentenced to it. She argues that for these soldiers, the rewards of a night's drinking or absence from routine were deemed worth the penalty. Perhaps, but military authorities continued to rely on it, giving a clear sense that they valued its effectiveness. Teresa Iacobelli, *Death or Deliverance: Canadian Courts Martial in the Great War* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2013), 28.

[19] During World War 1 there were generally three types of court-martial: District, General and Field General. District and General were convened if the offence occurred in Britain or Canada; Field General Courts Martial were, as the name implies, held whilst a unit was deployed in the field. District Courts-Martial were limited to awarding sentences of up to two years in duration. No such limitation existed for General or Field General Courts-Martial. Commissioned officers could be tried only by General or Field General Court-Martial. A fourth category of court-martial, the Regimental Court-Martial was used for ranks other than commissioned officers who were charged with lesser offences. They may be noted in war diaries, but according to Britain's National Archives, no records of these trials were sent to the Judge Advocate General's Office.

viewed by many scholars to be among the most ill-disciplined units in the CEF.[20] Perhaps one should not be surprised to note that both troubled units were culturally separated from the majority of Canada's army, one by race, the other by language.

Verbatim transcripts of No. 2's courts-martial, conserved in Ottawa, disclose gritty portraits of the accused. Interesting certainly, but are such accounts important? How does an examination of military and civil offences help in understanding a group of soldiers who volunteered for service a century ago? This challenge has been taken up by scholars who have focused on military discipline and punishment. As a result of their efforts, they have advanced our awareness of conditions and conduct within Commonwealth and other armed forces in the years 1914-1919.[21]

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[20] Of the 595 men who remained with the battalion in England and France, 33 or 5.5% were court-martialled. Jean-Pierre Gagnon indicated that of a total of 5,584 men who served with the 22nd battalion during its overseas posting, 185 were court-martialled. Accordingly, 3.1% or one in every thirty-three was court-martialled. See Jean-Pierre Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon (Canadien-français) 1914-1919 (Ottawa and Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval en collaboration avec le ministère de la Defence nationale et le Centre d'edition du gouvernement du Canada, 1987)*; 139 and Table 26, 291. Although he concurred with Gagnon's findings that the unit suffered from ill-discipline, Maxime Dagenais questioned Gagnon's data. In his review, Dagenais determined there were 233 courts-martial. In arriving at that number he employed charges laid, not individual prisoners tried; thus, a man facing three charges, who was convicted on two counts, appears in Dagenais' data as two courts-martial. Had I adopted this approach, I would have virtually doubled the number of courts-martial in No. 2. See Maxime Dagenais, "'Une Permission! C'est bon pour une recrue' Discipline and Illegal Absences in the 22nd (French-Canadian) Battalion, 1915-1919," *Canadian Military History*: 18: 4 (2009), endnote 26, 13.

[21] Recent scholarship confirms the importance of courts-martial in seeking to understand behaviour in military formations. There is an extensive bibliography of discipline relating to Commonwealth forces during World War One. Of particular application to this study are David Campbell, "Military Discipline, Punishment, and Leadership in the First World War: The Case of the 2nd Canadian Division" in *The Apathetic and the Defiant: Case Studies of Canadian Mutiny and Disobedience, 1812-1919*, ed. Craig Leslie Mantle (Ottawa: Dundurn Press, 2007); Jean-Pierre Gagnon, *Le 22e Bataillon (Canadien-français) 1914-1919* and Maxime Dagenais, "Discipline and Illegal Absences in the 22nd (French-Canadian) Battalion, 1915-1919"; both noted above; Teresa Iacobelli, *Death or Deliverance: Canadian Courts Martial in the Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013); Desmond Morton, "Kicking and Complaining: Demobilization Riots in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1918-1919", *Canadian*

From these studies, it becomes clear that there is no surer route into military culture than court-martial transcripts. In the case of Canada's Black battalion such transcripts speak not only of serious misconduct; they provide deeply personal insights into the men who served in that unit. Moreover, these documents illuminate the environment in which trials were held, portraying not a monochromatic climate of racism, but one breached by occasional and remarkable flashes of tolerance and empathy.

Apart from surviving letters home, testimony at these trials is the only access we now have to voices of No. 2's soldiers, the accused, victims and witnesses alike, when they were young, not elderly veterans recalling youthful exploits. Thus, through court-martial transcripts recorded 100 years ago these men speak to us in their own words. Uncensored, their testimony is gritty, uncomfortable and perhaps unsettling, exposing these Black soldiers as often angry, ill-disciplined and sometimes violent. Nonetheless, one glimpses in the words of some of the accused a nobility of spirit, a refusal to be accepted as inferior to other troops. The importance of these records cannot be overstated. Without them, much of life within this Black labour battalion would remain hidden from us.

Critics, unfamiliar with these trial transcripts, might assert there is good reason why courts-martial have not been incorporated into the narrative of No. 2. Focusing on missteps within a small group, detractors might say, only reinforces negative perceptions of African Canadians already abroad in contemporary society. Writing about a minority is a sensitive task, others may suggest, a different proposition from analysing behaviour occurring in larger social groups. Following this line of argument, one could assert that Quebecers, substantial in numbers yet still a minority within Canada's population, can withstand critical scrutiny of the numerous courts-martial occurring in their esteemed Great War formation, the 22nd Battalion. It could be argued that this is but one aspect of French-Canada's robust culture and deeply-rooted history. Conversely, it might be said African Canadian communities are too small, too uncertain of their own history to endure such probing into the conduct of a military unit they

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Historical Review, 61: 3 (1980); Gerry Oram, *Death Sentences passed by military courts of the British Army 1914–1924*, (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 1998); "'The administration of discipline by the English is very rigid': British Military Law and the Death Penalty, 1868-1918", in *Crime, Histories and Societies*, 5: 1, 2001; and "The Greatest Efficiency: British and American Military Law, 1866-1918" in Barry Godfrey, Clive Emsley and Graeme Dunstall, eds., *Comparative History of Crimes*, (London and New York: Willan Publishing, 2003).

have embraced as their own. Such a view demeans African Canadians, binding them to an outmoded interpretation of their past; moreover, it is a subtle form of infantilization, suggesting citizens are unable to deal maturely with troubling aspects of their own history.

What lay at the root of No. 2's indiscipline? After exploring hundreds of charges dealt with by Company Commanders and a thorough review of thirty-three overseas courts-martial, indications of racial bias do emerge. That appraisal suggests nine courts-martial were affected in some way by racial prejudice, with another four perhaps being so influenced. The most prominent among the latter was the trial of Private William Smith of Halifax in the summer of 1917. In all likelihood that court-martial sentenced an innocent man to a lengthy term of penal servitude.

One could conclude, therefore, that race was a major factor in either charges being laid or judgements being rendered. It would be improper, however, to assert that racial prejudice alone drove either Company punishment or courts-martial in this battalion. Sentences issued by Company Commanders for troops being absent without leave, abandoning a post or drunkenness rest in lapses of military discipline, not in racism. Analysis of twenty courts-martial likewise fails to turn up any racial taint. Moreover, assumptions of racism do not explain the violence enacted by battalion members on their fellow Black soldiers. One murder, two charges of manslaughter and a slew of vicious assaults might more easily flow from the crowded conditions in which the men lived, from drunkenness, lust, unrestrained anger, cultural clashes between soldiers of diverse geographic and social backgrounds, or in some instances, criminality.

Cases of indiscipline might have been rooted elsewhere: ineffective leadership by battalion officers; or importantly, decisions by higher Command to scatter the troops across France and England, far from the front lines, diminishing any green shoots of unit pride or *esprit de corps*. A significant contributor might have been the nature of the battalion itself. Throughout their time in France, volunteers were not posted to front line duty, remaining labourers far from sodden trenches, coils of wire, duckboards and enemy fire. Even fifty persistent offenders, who, as punishment for their serial indiscipline, had been posted to British lines in France, worked in rear echelons. Frustrated, many no doubt agreed with Sergeant Walter A. Johnston's evaluation of the mood of the battalion. In a July, 1918 letter to the *Halifax Herald* he wrote that the boys were

"anxious to get a chance at Fritz."[22] It was not to be. Even in the midst of Germany's offensive in the spring of 1918, attacks that shattered Allied lines, and in the final push in the autumn of that year, men of No. 2 remained unarmed, confined to their labours in the mountains bordering Switzerland and in the forests of Normandy.

When two battalions of White soldiers of the Canadian Forestry Corps, some of whom had worked beside Black labourers in Jura and Normandy, were activated and transferred to the front lines, men of No. 2 continued to mend roads, cut trees, stack lumber and load trains.[23] This annoyed their Commanding Officer. The men grumbled. Private Ralph Freeman, who had travelled from Texas to Windsor, Ontario to enlist, used this dissatisfaction to explain his behaviour, arguing at his court-martial in October of 1918 that he had been misled by recruiters. "I enlisted under the impression that when I reached England I would be transferred to a fighting unit. But I never have been. I wish to be transferred to a fighting unit."[24] To war's end, No. 2 remained uncommitted to battle, un-blooded. In December, as troops of the Canadian Corps marched into Germany, establishing bridgeheads over the Rhine, soldiers of No. 2 were hastily withdrawn from France. The majority of these Black volunteers were home by January, with a few lingering in British holding camps until spring of 1919.

Like others from the United States who fought as part of Allied forces in the Great War, American volunteers to No. 2 had not enlisted under their nation's flag. Their service in the CEF no doubt dulled in comparison to that of their White compatriots who had joined French air squadrons or with their fellow African Americans, who had remained faithful to the

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[22] A letter to the editor, over the signature of Halifax native, Sergeant Walter A. Johnson, portrayed the men of No. 2 as patriotic Canadian soldiers, "anxious to get a chance at Fritz." See Letter to Editor, dated "in the Field", 26 July 1918, published in *Halifax Herald*, 4 September 1918. I am grateful to Garry Shutlack, Senior Reference Archivist, Nova Scotia Archives for bringing this letter to my attention.

[23] In March of 1918 the Forestry Corps trained two battalions of 800 men each for combat roles. Troops from all Districts were enlisted and in October these men were sent up to the line. C. W. Bird and B. J. Davies, *The Canadian Forestry Corps: Its Inception, Development and Achievements*, (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1919), 37.

[24] Court-Martial of Private Ralph Freeman, 931613, RG 150, Ministry of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada, Series 8, File 649-F-12706, Microfilm number T-8665, Prisoner's testimony, LAC.

Constitution, serving in the 92nd and 93rd Divisions of the American Expeditionary Forces. In post-war America's Black communities service in a foreign labour battalion could not compare with being a member of the 369th Regiment, the 'Harlem Hellfighters', or other celebrated units within those two army formations.[25] Sensing this perception and perhaps embracing it, American veterans of No. 2 Construction Battalion frequently responded in the negative to questions put to them by US census-takers about their service in the Great War.

Canadian veterans of the battalion were treated with indifference on their return. Men of No. 2 who disembarked from the ocean liners *Olympic* and *Empress of Britain* at Halifax in January of 1919 received muted welcomes.[26] They had no final victory march through a flag-waving home depot. Carrying travel warrants, they boarded trains and made their way across the country to their chosen places of demobilization. After final processing they emerged civilians, with Discharge Certificates in hand, proof to potential employers that they had served. In their pockets they carried $70 from a grateful government, the first of five instalments of their War Service Gratuity. As they re-established themselves, the countries to which they had returned no doubt seemed very much like the countries they had left, lands in which Black citizens confronted

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[25] Both Divisions were created in 1917 and were deployed to France. At the outset of American operations both British and American hierarchies hesitated to use either formation in combat. Upon completion of rudimentary training, their component brigades were incorporated under French command, more experienced and at greater ease with Black colonial soldiers as fighting troops. Like Canada's No. 2's, many of these American troops were, however, confined to non-combat roles. Unlike the volunteers in Canada's Black Battalion, these two divisions were composed primarily of African American men drafted under the USA's Selective Service Act. Elements of both American Divisions eventually saw action with French forces in late summer of 1918 and, under American Command, the 92nd later took part during the Meuse-Argonne offensive in the autumn of that year. See Arthur E. Barbeau, Florette Henri and Bernard C. Nalty, *The Unknown Soldiers: African American Troops in World War 1*, (New York City: Da Capo Press, 1996).

[26] These ships were the first to arrive in Canada carrying members of No. 2. Other, smaller contingents of the Black Battalion would arrive at Halifax and Saint John, New Brunswick over the following months until all but those serving long term prison sentences and those who had asked to be discharged in England had been repatriated. Among the 3,000 troops on board the *Empress* there were 163 Nova Scotian volunteers to No. 2. Most American and western Canadian members of the battalion had arrived on the *Olympic* in the previous week.

discrimination. To secure their rightful place in society would require a much longer struggle than the one just concluded.

Their involvement in that war was little known. Even the Corps to which these volunteers had been attached during those months in England and France overlooked their contribution. A review of wartime activities of the Canadian Forestry Corps, published in 1919, not only dismissed their involvement, it gave no indication that the men of the battalion had ever existed. "In all operations of the Canadian Forestry Corps in France," the authors reported, "they have had attached to their companies unskilled labour, such as Prisoners of War, Chinese Labour Companies, and Russian Labour Companies."[27] Not a function of immediate post-war confusion, this neglect was repeated in the 1962 official account of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War.

> In all the Canadian forestry operations attached labour played an important part. Companies on either side of the Channel employed British and prisoner-of-war labour. Those in France, 56 companies when the war ended, used Chinese labour as well. Units in England and Scotland were liberally augmented by Finnish and Portuguese personnel.[28]

Not so much consigned to history, the men and the battalion were lost to it. Even headstones, marking graves of those who had died on active service in England and France, erased the battalion. These government-erected markers usually described No. 2's volunteers incorrectly as belonging to the CEF's Canadian Railway Troops or the Canadian Overseas Railway Construction Corps. The ultimate insult, it was these formations that in the spring of 1917 had judged Black soldiers morally defective.

A wide array of documents now enables researchers to evaluate the volunteers' experiences throughout their months in the King's army. Important as their service was, their lives did not end with their return to Canadian ports in the winter and spring of 1919. Without analyzing their integration into post-war society, any account of this Black labour battalion remains incomplete. Again, based on documents, one is able to follow many of them, those who had been offenders during their army days and those who had patiently done their duty. For some veterans, no

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[27] Bird and Davies, *The Canadian Forestry Corps*, 37.

[28] Colonel G.W. L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918*, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), 500.

doubt, their war did not conclude when the armistice was proclaimed in November of 1918: for them it continued to be an important element of their lives. The majority, however, consigned those months to memory, involved in another struggle on their return home, being Black in White society.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY CHALLENGES: INDIFFERENCE, DESERTIONS, DISCHARGES AND DISCIPLINE

In the summer of 1916, only weeks after the Black Battalion had been authorised as part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, Rev. Moses B. Puryear, the American pastor of Cornwallis Street Baptist Church in Halifax, urged all faithful African Baptists to rally to their nation's flag. An acknowledged leader in the African Baptist Association since his arrival in Nova Scotia in 1909[1], Puryear claimed the instrument was now at hand with which Black men could demonstrate their religious commitment and fulfil their patriotic obligation.

"We should fill up quickly the ranks of No. 2 Construction Battalion," he told the annual assembly of the African Baptist Association, "for a failure on our part to comply with the request of the Government would be an insult to the Flag under whose protection we have enjoyed the fullness of freedom for over 100 years and we would prove ourselves unfaithful as Baptists."[2] Without doubt that same message was repeated by Puryear from his pulpit and by clerics at other churches that comprised that fellowship. These appeals were part of a continuing propaganda campaign directed at Black men in Canada's Maritime Provinces.

A year earlier a fresh, new secular source had set out a similar message. In its inaugural edition of April 1915, the *Atlantic Advocate* prominently displayed H. S. Bunbury's praise of Jamaican men who had taken up arms,

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[1] Pearleen Oliver, *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953*, (Halifax, Nova Scotia: McCurdy Printing Co., 1953), 42.

[2] Rev. Moses Purview's comments are cited in Susanah E. Willliams, "The Role of the African United Baptist Association in the Development of Indiginous Afro-Canadians in Nova Scotia, 1782-1978" in Barry M. Moody, ed., *Repent and Believe: The Baptist Experience in Maritime Canada* (Hantsport, Nova Scotia: Acadia Divinity College and the Baptist Historical Committee, 1980), 56.

presumably to encourage a similar patriotic response by African Canadians on Canada's east coast.[3] In that edition, the publisher also reported on Black volunteers who had enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. "12 coloured men loyally joined the colours with the 112th Battalion of the Digby unit," it noted. "Mr. Lester Ince," it continued, "a native of Barbados who joined the 60th battalion last summer is now at the front. Mr. A. Gabriel of the RCR is still with us."[4] To the editorial staff of the *Advocate*, these men were models of appropriate behaviour. By January 1917 the *Atlantic Advocate* presented No. 2 Construction Battalion as "the expression of the Dominion's coloured manhood and their pride." Recognising the unit had not achieved its recruitment goal, Lionel Cross, by then its editor, cautioned Black men who hesitated joining in the fight. There could be, he hinted, post-war repercussions for those who failed to serve. In an article entitled simply "Join No. 2," Cross, who already had enlisted in the battalion, warned ominously: "If there are good things coming to you after the war, you may be assured that they will be meted out to you in proportion to what service you have rendered when those services were needed most."[5]

The Atlantic Advocate was not the only African Canadian publication supporting the war. Residing in Toronto, Ontario, Joseph Whitney published the weekly *Canadian Observer* from December 1914 through to mid-1919. It, too, advanced a jingoistic perspective, promoting Canada's involvement in the European conflict. As Sean Flynn Foyn has tabulated, the *Observer* was particularly assiduous in its support during the period of 16 December 1915 to 18 March 1916. During these months Foyn asserts that the front page of each edition of this Black weekly "was emblazoned with militaristic images."[6] Encouraging Black commitment to Canada's war aims seemed central to both publications, yet their effectiveness in

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[3] Henry S. Bunbury was an Anglo-Irish poet, who, after service with the British government, lived in Cuba and ultimately in Jamaica. In an era when Jamaica's ties to empire were celebrated, his poetry was popular. In his "Chant for Our Contingent" he saw Jamaican males achieving nobility through service in the European war, which to him was a public duty.
[4] *Atlantic Advocate*, Volume 1, No. 1, 14 (April 1915).
[5] *Ibid.,* Volume 1, No. 6, 10 (January 1917).
[6] Sean Flynn Foyn, "The Underside of Glory: Africanadian Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917", a thesis in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arrts, University of Ottawa, 1999, accessed on line 15 April 2016 at https://www.ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/8894/1/MQ48151.PDF.

driving recruitment is questionable, a function perhaps of the limited appeal of the message as much as the restricted circulation of the journals.

Clergy and editors together urged Black men of the Dominion to come forward and join in what they portrayed as a righteous crusade against Germany and its allies. In the early months of recruitment, July through October, it seemed that young men would take up that challenge and join No. 2 Construction Battalion. Those were heady months for the unit: in late July approval to recruit across the country was granted. A training depot at Windsor, Ontario was quickly established, providing access to a large population of African American males across the Detroit River. It was in this period that family groups enthusiastically signed up together: four members of the Jarvis family of Weymouth Falls, a rural hamlet in Nova Scotia, enlisted in the third week of July; three members of the Bushfan family of Saint John, New Brunswick, joined the battalion in August; Alberga brothers, George and Albert, Jamaicans attending McGill University in Montreal, joined in September; from St. Catherines, Ontario the Bright brothers, Arthur and Norman, enlisted on September 26; on October 13 four Cromwell boys from Digby County, Nova Scotia were taken on strength; and in mid-October the two Whims brothers from Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, enlisted.

Early enthusiasm was illusory. As autumn drew to a close, less than 400 men of the anticipated 1,000 had come forward. November was a particularly slow month, with only fifty-two volunteers enlisting across Canada. A burst of energetic recruitment in Nova Scotia rescued December from similar dismal numbers. A reporter for the *Halifax Herald* recorded the results of one successful recruiting drive during that month. At a community meeting on December 11 in Hammonds Plains, a hamlet northwest of Halifax, six men responded to urgings of Sergeant Major Wilfred DeCosta and Sergeant Lionel Cross, both immigrants from the Caribbean and active in forging the *Atlantic Advocate's* pro-war policy. The *Herald's* journalist pointed out that the December rally bore a very different result from earlier efforts in the village: according to him, previous recruitment drives had been "barren of results."[7]

Enrolments picked up in 1917, with fully one quarter of the battalion's volunteers enlisting in the first three months of the new year; yet without ninety-three Americans, who enrolled at Windsor during those months, the battalion would have been in dire straits, indeed. No. 2 continued its

[7] *Halifax Herald*, 15 December 1916.

search for volunteers virtually up to its departure for Britain. According to the unit's nominal roll, Private James Henry Marshall, twenty-seven years of age, an American born in Tennessee but resident in Calgary, was the final volunteer to enlist. Marshall had been taken on strength on March 16 at Truro, nine days before the unit sailed from Halifax.[8]

Despite being augmented by substantial numbers of American citizens and British West Indians, most of the latter having been workers in Nova Scotia at the outbreak of war, the battalion remained seriously short of its authorised strength. Calvin Ruck postulated reasons for this disappointing shortfall: "previous rejection and humiliation of black volunteers; Blacks objecting to serving in a segregated non-combatant labour battalion; and the blatant exclusion of potential Black immigrants, particularly in Western Canada."[9] While no doubt true in part, Ruck's logic isolated African Canadians from other citizens who maintained doubts about the war. It was not only in French Canada that misgivings existed over involvement in that conflict. Many immigrant communities in the west hesitated to encourage their young men to enlist and, unlike African Baptists in Nova Scotia, not all Christian denominations in the country encouraged unthinking support of the war.[10] That all eligible Black males

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[8] See Nominal Roll of Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men, No. 2 Construction Battalion.

[9] Ruck, *Canada's Black Battalion*, 25. Calvin Ruck's allusion to immigration issues in western Canada is a reference to a 26 October 1916 memorandum from W. B. Scott, Canada's Superintendent of Immigration, concerning applications for entry by African Americans made to the Vancouver office. These men indicated they were intending to volunteer for service with No. 2. Scott did not favour their entrance, believing there was no shortage "of recruits for forestry and construction battalions and I think it would be unwise to allow a lot of coloured men to get a foothold in Canada, even under the guise of enlistment in such a battalion." See Memorandum from W. B. Scott to Mr. Cory, 26 October 1916 in Leo W. Bertley, *Canada and Its People of African Descent*, (Pierrefonds, Quebec: Bilongo Publishers, 1977), 21.

[10] Michelle Fowler argues that the Presbyterian Church in Canada's press justified support of the war on the basis that it was a just war. In this, she opposes the views of Michael Bliss, who in 1968 laid down the argument that has maintained strength and relevance even today. Bliss contended Methodists, one of the major Protestant organizations in Canada, were ambivalent in regard to the war, with supporters overwhelmed by a surfeit of patriotic zeal, whilst others remained firmly attached to their denomination's commitment to pacifism. See Michael Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War 1", *Canadian History Review*, 49, No. 3, (September 1968) and Michelle Fowler, "Keeping the Faith: the Presbyterian press in peace and war, 1913-1919", a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of a Master

did not come forward should be no surprise. Differences of opinion existed throughout Canada about involvement in this war and it would be naive to assume those divisions were not present among its African Canadian population.

The major sources of manpower of those who shipped out of Halifax in March of 1917 were Nova Scotia (243), United States of America (171), Ontario (88) and the British West Indies (71: 50 of whom had been resident in Nova Scotia). Smaller contingents came from New Brunswick and western Canadian provinces. Given the distribution of volunteers, it would be a mistake to view Black recruitment to the battalion from any single focus. Attitudes to the war were influenced by more than issues specific to citizens of African descent. Those who were literate read newspapers other than the *Atlantic Advocate* or the *Canadian Observer*; they knew the war was not going well for the Allies. Of those Canadians who volunteered, simple patriotism might have been a motive for some to join the colours; for others, as Calvin Ruck has pointed out, there might have been some sense that by joining they would demonstrate Black manhood. More sanguine volunteers might have realized that voluntary enlistment could not replenish the CEF's battle losses, and with rumours of conscription to fill ranks thinned by death and wounds, they opted to enlist in a unit composed of men like themselves.

Explanations for such a large contingent of American citizens are even more diffuse. It has been suggested that *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, the New York City monthly publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, played some role in encouraging American recruitment.[11] Featuring crisp reporting on a wide variety of topics ranging from African American achievements in education, arts, literature, religion, science and even monthly reports on recent lynchings, *The Crisis* was undoubtedly an important contributor to the formation of a national African American culture. Whilst this journal noted in its November, 1916 edition that "Canada is seeking to recruit a battalion of Negroes at Windsor", it is difficult to substantiate any impact this might have had on its estimated 100,000 readers.[12] Few, if any, American volunteers to No. 2 fitted *The Crisis'* social-economic niche.

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in Arts degree at Wilfred Laurier University, 2005, at http://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/43/, accessed 29 December 2015.

[11] Foyn, *Underside of Glory*, 101.

[12] *The Crisis*, Volume 13, No. 1, 30, (November 1916). Readership numbers are found in *The Crisis*, Volume 12, No. 5 , 218, (September 1916).

The vast majority of those who enlisted at Windsor were manual labourers, with many indicating their illiteracy on their attestation papers; thus it seems unlikely that any were subscribers or even readers of that monthly publication. Moreover, the two most complete references to the Black battalion appeared in *The Crisis* after the unit had reached England.[13]

As with Canadian volunteers, there was a wide range of influences on these men. Of the 171 Americans, several had lived in the bustling industrial hubs of Detroit and Chicago, while others were residents of America's Deep South.[14] The almost two dozen US volunteers with previous military experience might have believed they could make a contribution to the war effort; others of that group might have chafed at civilian life. Some American civilians, like Ralph Freeman, living in Texas prior to his enlistment, might have just wanted to get into the fight.[15] Others, no doubt, saw volunteering as a way of escaping the dullness of everyday life; a few, like some White volunteers to the CEF, might have been escaping unwanted domestic or judicial circumstances.

Like those Americans, residents of Canada who rallied to the battalion shared few characteristics beyond race: they came from towns in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Ontario; nine resided in Canada's largest cities; eight lived in Black communities in northern Alberta or southern

[13] In its April, 1917 edition *The Crisis* noted: "It is reported that several hundred American Negroes are joining the Canadian armies." (293) The June edition of the same year reported: "The second construction battalion consisting of Canadian colored men together with a good many American Negroes has arrived in England." (85) A review of attestation papers for American volunteers indicates that the flow of Americans into the battalion occurred in the following progression: September of 1916-9%; October, 1916-6%; November, 1916-10%; December, 1916-7%; January, 1917-40%; February, 1917-21%; and March, 1917-7%. Thus, unless one is able to establish a 'trickle-down' information trail between the November 1916 comment in *The Crisis* and January enlistments, it becomes difficult to establish any relationship between scattered references in the journal to American Blacks joining the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

[14] I have determined there were 171 men who sailed from Halifax on 28 March 1917 whose next of kin were listed with USA addresses. This is a better determinant of nationality than place of enlistment or birth place. See No. 2 Construction Battalion, Nominal Roll.

[15] Court-Martial of Private Ralph Freeman, RG150, Ministry of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada, Series 8, File 649-F-12706, Microfilm Reel Number T-8665, Prisoner's Statement, LAC.