

No. 2 Construction Battalion

The No. 2 Construction Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force — also known as the Black Battalion — was a segregated non-combatant unit during the First World War. It was the first and only segregated, all-Black battalion in Canadian military history.



Logging operations were a key part of No. 2 Construction Battalion's work
Photo courtesy of the Sutherland Family, and the Army Museum in Halifax



"They gave us shovels, not rifles"

The unit held non-combatant status. Several Blacks who joined the unit felt “The army let us join but wouldn’t let us fight. They gave us shovels, not rifles”. Working in the mountains in France through logging operations they built and repaired trenches, roads, bridges and railways, among other tasks.

Chaplain Captain Willian White



Reverend White became one of the few Black commissioned officers in the army when he enlisted on 1 February 1917. In his role as Chaplain for the Canadian Expeditionary Force’s only segregated unit, Reverend White fought for the equal treatment of Black soldiers both in Canada and overseas. He preached race consciousness, inspired advocacy and social advancement, and provided spiritual support for “the boys” of the No. 2 Construction Battalion. White was Anthony Sherwood’s Great Uncle and Sherwood made the docudrama “Honour Before Glory” based upon the diary White kept.

Canada Post Commemorative Stamp

February 2016, 100 years after the No. 2 Construction Battalion was formed, Canada Post honoured its determined soldiers on an African Heritage Month stamp. The men of the No. 2 Construction Battalion harvested, milled and shipped timber to the Western Front. In camp, they faced harsh conditions, segregated accommodations and back-breaking work. Some did not return home.



With the majority of Canada’s Black population in Nova Scotia, on 5 July 1916, the new unit No. 2 Construction Battalion was authorized with headquarters at Pictou. Although Canadian Expeditionary Force units normally recruited locally, No. 2 Construction Battalion recruited from across Canada, making it a truly national unit composed of 605 Black servicemen. This includes the 22 men from the Niagara region.

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In March 1917 the unit embarked at Halifax and disembarked two weeks later at Liverpool and immediately took the train to their camp in southern England. There they built practice trenches and constructed and repaired roads. On 17 May 1917 No. 2 Construction Company crossed the English Channel to France. The unit took the train to Lajoux, near the Swiss border. Here, in the Jura Mountains, it spent the rest of the war.

Attached to No. 5 District, Canadian Forestry Corps, soldiers of the battalion assisted four forestry companies in logging, milling and shipping. When the war ended, No. 2 Construction Company sailed for Halifax in January 1919, and on 15 September 1920, the unit officially disbanded. Canada’s first and only Black military unit was no more.

Duty Roster: A Typical Work Day



Russell Miller served in both the First and Second World War

- 5:00 A.M. – Reveille
- 5:30 a.m. – Breakfast
- 6:40 a.m. – Parade forms up and working parties move off in sufficient time to reach various places of employment at 0700 hrs.
- 12:00 p.m. –Dinner. Parties near the camp return for dinner; balance of dinners sent out to work by G.S. Wagon.
- 12:45 p.m. – Fall in, Afternoon work starts ar 1300 hrs and continues until 6:00 p.m.
- 6:00 p.m. – Supper
- 6:30 p.m. – O.C’s. Orders.
- 9:00 p.m. – First Post.
- 9:30 p.m. – Last Post. Weekly, on Monday, an inspection of the men and barracks.
- 9:45 p.m. – Lights Out

They worked 10 hours a day, six days a week, using hand tools. Living and working conditions were harsh. They endured segregation: their sleeping quarters were separate from those of white soldiers, as was the hospital wing where they received medical treatment. While most never saw combat, some died from pneumonia or other diseases. It is no wonder the men were becoming ill or collapsing while on duty.



Ernest Bell of St. Catharines, Ontario, 1916