

THROUGH THEIR EYES

Was Canada's Response to Black Soldiers Racist?

WORDS TO KNOW

White Anglo-Saxon
expeditionary
Esq.
HQ
militia
contingent
KCMG
CB
vain
imitative
impelled
platoon
askance
facetiously
advocate

1. Share with a partner reasons why you think people decide to join the armed forces.
2. Should there be any restrictions on who can join? Why or why not? What would influence your thinking about this issue?

BEFORE READING

In 1914, Canadian society had a fairly rigid racial, linguistic, religious, and ethnic structure. White Anglo-Saxon males were at top of the scale, followed by White immigrants from European countries, then White immigrants from non-European countries such as Russia and the Ukraine. Non-White Canadians were at the lower end. This structure, to a large extent, carried over to the military during the First World War.

For example, it was official military policy that any man who was of age and medically fit could join the army. However, it was up to commanding officers of local regiments or battalions to accept or reject applicants. In 1914, most Black Canadian applicants were rejected, although a few Black Canadians managed to enlist in White battalions, including the 25th Battalion from Nova Scotia and the 106th Battalion, Nova Scotia Rifles.

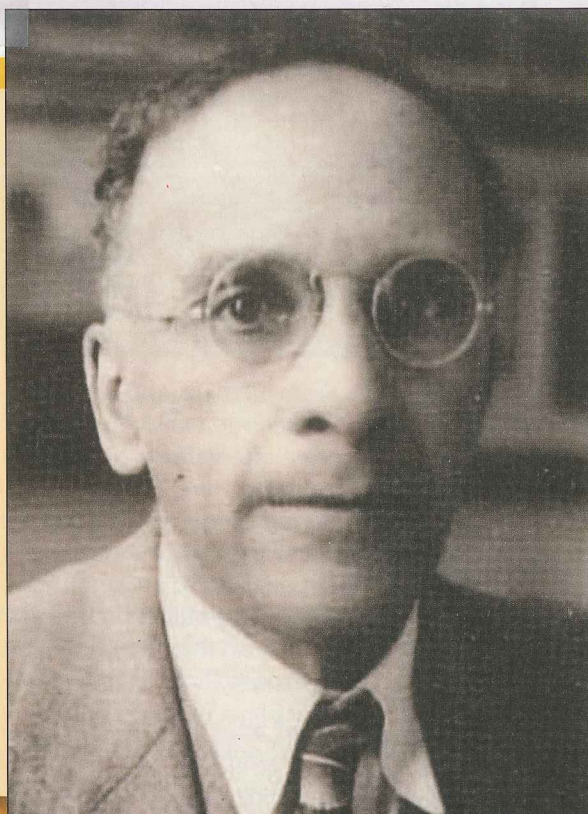
For each of the following letters and memo, prepare an organizer like the one below.

| Retell (key points of each) | Relate (make connections to what you already know) | Reflect (questions, thoughts) |
|---|---|---|
| Start with "This is about" or "I noticed" | Start with "This reminds me of" or "This makes me feel" | Start with "I wonder if" or "Now I want to learn" |

1. What questions would you like to ask, if you could, that would help you understand why each letter and memo was written?
2. What do the letters and memo tell you about attitudes in early 20th-century Canada?
3. Predict what might happen next, remembering that the memo was written in 1916, two years into the war.

DURING READING

Arthur Alexander served as principal of North Buxton's school for 37 years. North Buxton is located in southwestern Ontario. Alexander had just turned 29 when he wrote this letter on November 6, 1914.



Minister of Defence
Ottawa

Nov. 6, 1914

Dear Sir,
The coloured people of Canada want to know why they are not allowed to enlist in the Canadian militia. I am informed that several who have applied for enlistment in the Canadian expeditionary forces have been refused for no other apparent reason than their colour, as they were physically and mentally fit.
Thanking you in advance for any information that you can & will give me in regards to this matter

I remain
Yours Respectfully, for King & Country,

Arthur Alexander,
North Buxton, Ont.

Evidence 1.13

Evidence 1.14

November 20, 1914
To Arthur Alexander, Esq.,
North Buxton, Ont.
H.Q. 297-1-21

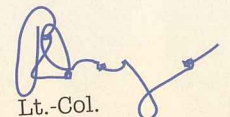
Sir, -

The Honourable Minister of Militia and Defence has duly received your letter of 6th instant enquiring about coloured people not being allowed to enlist in the Canadian Militia for Overseas Expeditionary Force.

Under instructions already issued, the selection of Officers and men for the second contingent is entirely in the hands of Commanding Officers, and their selections or rejections are not interfered with from Headquarters.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,
Your obedient servant,


Lt.-Col.
Military Secretary

Some White Canadians tried to help Black Canadians serve overseas. J.R.B. Whitney, publisher of the *Canadian Observer* in Nova Scotia, for example, raised a platoon of Black men. However, no battalion would accept the Black platoon, and Whitney had to disband it.

In May 1916, the British government indicated that it would be willing to accept a non-combatant Black battalion. In July, Black Canadians were finally given an opportunity to enlist in the newly formed No. 2 Construction Battalion. This was the first and only Black battalion in Canadian history. Most of the over 600 men came from Nova Scotia, with others from New Brunswick, Ontario, Western Canada, and the United States. Over 10 percent of Canada's Black population served during the war.

In 1917, the No. 2 Construction Battalion arrived in England. In May, the battalion departed for France, where its members assisted in logging, milling, and shipping operations that provided the lumber needed to maintain trenches on the front lines. They also repaired roads and helped provide water. The battalion was commanded by Lt. Colonel D.H. Sutherland, a White Canadian. Sutherland recommended that the members of the battalion be transferred to the Western Front because of their excellent work. However, the war ended before the battalion could be sent. The No. 2 Construction Battalion was disbanded in 1920.

Evidence 1.16

What reasons do you think the government had for preparing this poster, given the views expressed in Evidence 1.13, 1.14, and 1.15?

Evidence 1.15

Sir Willoughby Garnons Gwatkin, KCMG, CB
Chief of the General Staff
13 April 1916
Memorandum on the enlistment of Negroes in Canadian Expeditionary Force

Excerpt from Major-General Gwatkin's memo of April 13, 1916.

1. Nothing is to be gained by blinking facts. The civilized negro is vain and imitative; in Canada he is not being 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 on terms of equality. Not a single commanding officer in Military District No. 2 is willing to accept a coloured platoon as part of his battalion (H.Q. 297-1-29); and it would be humiliating to the coloured men themselves to serve in a battalion where they were not wanted. ...
2. In France, in the firing line, there is no place for a black battalion, C.E.F. [Canadian Expeditionary Force]. It would be eyed askance ...

COLORED MEN!

Your King and Country
Need YOU!

NOW is the time to show your Patriotism and Loyalty.

WILL YOU HEED THE CALL AND DO YOUR SHARE?

□ □ □

Your Brothers of the Colonies have rallied to the Flag and are distinguishing themselves at the Front.

Here also is your opportunity to be identified in the Greatest War of History, where the Fate of Nations who stand for Liberty is at stake. Your fortunes are equally at stake as those of your White Brethren.

□ □ □

NO. 2 CONSTRUCTION BATTALION

Now being Organized All Over the Dominion
Summons You. WILL YOU SERVE?

The British and their Allies are now engaged in a great forward movement. Roads, Bridges and Railways must be made to carry the Victors forward. The need of the day is Pioneers, Construction Companies and Railway Construction Companies. No. 1 Construction Company has been recruited. No. 2 Construction Company is now called for.

Lt. Col. D.H. Sutherland is in charge of the Company's Headquarters at Pictou; at Halifax applications may be made at the Parade Recruiting Station; elsewhere to any Recruiting Officer, or by letter to —

MAJOR W.B.A. RITCHIE, Chief Recruiting Officer, Halifax, N.S.

Grave marker of Private Jeremiah A. (Jerry) Jones. During the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Canadian troops were pinned down by German machine-gun fire. Jones worked his way across the battlefield to the machine-gun nest and tossed a hand grenade into the Germans' position. Several soldiers were killed and the rest surrendered to Jones. Jones was not granted the Distinguished Conduct Medal for which he had been recommended, because he was Black. Over the years, efforts continued to have his achievements recognized. In September 2000, this grave marker was unveiled in Truro, Nova Scotia, with full Royal Canadian Legion honours. The sculpture was taken down in October 2007 because of excessive wood decay in the base. The Jones family and the artist, Bruce Wood, are looking into creating a fibreglass copy of the original for reinstallation.

Truro Daily News

August 17, 1917

A "D.C.M." for a Truro Soldier

**Pte. Jerry Jones, Ford St., Runs in Bunch of Huns
Captures Their Machine Gun
Facetiously Hands M.G. Over to His C.O.
Has been recommended for Distinguished Conduct Medal
—what a Truro Officer in England writes.**

We believe the well-known, industrious and highly respected Truro colored man, Pte. Jerry Jones, a resident of Ford Street, who went overseas with the 106th Battalion, has scored a big hit in his scraps with the Huns at the front.

When Jerry Jones joined the 106th under Col. Innis, he was a strapping big fellow—a fine looking soldier—he took a humble position; played his part well; went over-

seas; volunteered for the battlefield and has been a terror to the treacherous German on more than one occasion.

He was lately wounded in action and is just recovering and nobly getting ready for his "bit" again.

He has shown himself a patriot, brave, powerful and resourceful, and we understand he has been recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

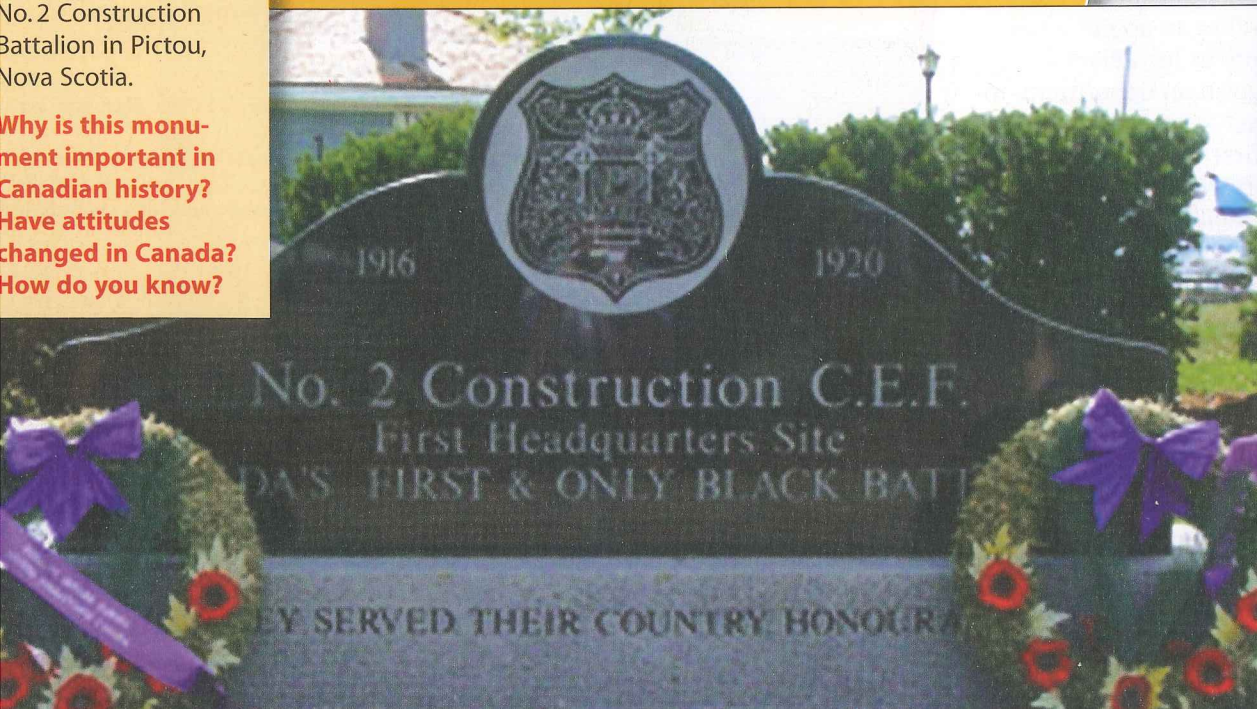
Evidence 1.17



Evidence 1.18

Monument to the No. 2 Construction Battalion in Pictou, Nova Scotia.

Why is this monument important in Canadian history? Have attitudes changed in Canada? How do you know?



In 1991, to honour the No. 2 Construction Battalion, the Pictou town council in Nova Scotia declared Market Wharf, which had been the headquarters of the battalion, to be municipal historic property. In 1993, the Canadian Historic Sites and Monuments Board announced its decision to commemorate Market Wharf. On July 10, 1993, a monument to the battalion (Evidence 1.18) was officially unveiled.

Then and NOW

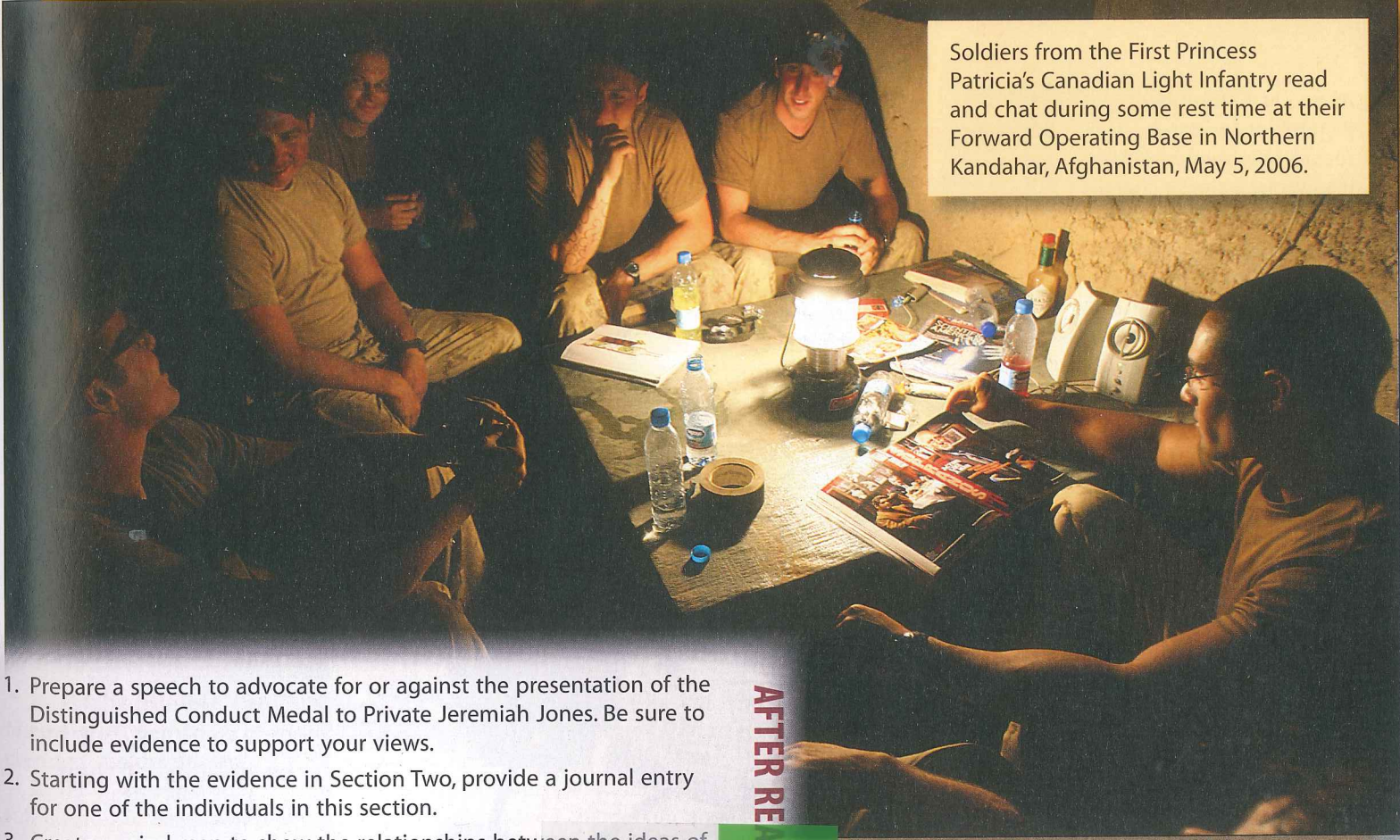
When you compare the photographs in Evidence 1.19 and 1.20, what conclusions can you draw about changes in attitudes toward Black Canadians in Canadian society and the Canadian forces?

Evidence 1.19

Officers and men of the Black Canadian unit at Windsor, Nova Scotia. These men were part of the No. 2 Construction Battalion.



Evidence 1.20



Soldiers from the First Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry read and chat during some rest time at their Forward Operating Base in Northern Kandahar, Afghanistan, May 5, 2006.

1. Prepare a speech to advocate for or against the presentation of the Distinguished Conduct Medal to Private Jeremiah Jones. Be sure to include evidence to support your views.
2. Starting with the evidence in Section Two, provide a journal entry for one of the individuals in this section.
3. Create a mind map to show the relationships between the ideas of military leaders and the contributions of Black soldiers during the First World War. Use the question from the section title, "Was Canada's response to Black soldiers racist?" as your central concept.

AFTER READING