

# 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.

1. 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"

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

DURING READING

Evidence 1.13

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 1.14

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

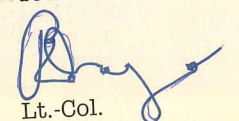
Sir, —

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 1.15

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 ...

Evidence 1.16

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

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.

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.

