THROUGH THEIR EYES

Was Canada's Response to Black Soldiers Racist?

In 1914, Canadian society had a fairly rigid racial, linguistic, religious, and ethnic structure. White Anglo-Saxon males were at the 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.

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

Minister of Defence

Ottawa

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

Your Respectfully, for King & Country,

Arthur Alexander

North Boston, Ont.

November 20, 1914

To Arthur Alexander, Esq.,

North Boston, Ont.

H.Q. 2871-31.

Sir—

The Honourable Minister of Militia and Defence has only 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 selection 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 served in England. In May, the battalion departed for France, where its members assisted in logging, milling, and shipping operations that provided the timber needed to maintain trenches on the front lines. They also repaired roads and helped provide water. The battalion was commanded by Lt. Colonel J.H. Sutherland, a White Canadian. Sutherland recommended that the members of the battalion be transferred to the Western Front because of their expert knowledge of the problems that needed to be solved. The No. 2 Construction Battalion was disbanded in 1920.

Sir Willoughby Dowse Gwatkin, KCMG, CB

Chief of the General Staff

18 April 1916

Memorandum on the enlistment of Negroed in Canadian Expeditionary Force

1. Nothing is to be gained by blinking facts. The civilized negro is as intelligent as the White Canadian 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 part of his battalion (HQ. 2871-20); and it is impossible 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.B.E. (Canadian Expeditionary Force). It would be an

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