

Stamp for No. 2 Construction Battalion

In January 2016, Canada Post honoured No. 2 Construction Battalion of the First World War Canadian Expeditionary Force to pay tribute to the pride, determination, and sacrifice of Canada's only predominantly black battalion.

During the First World War, racial prejudice among recruiters saw many black applicants turned away when they tried to enlist. In 1916, the Afro-Canadian community wanted to form a unit based on their desire to serve King and Country in the "Great War for Civilization." The Canadian army policies at that time allowed commanding officers to accept or reject "coloured" men who offered themselves for service.



At that stage of the war, soldiers were urgently required to support the troops with capabilities such as entrenching, road, railway and tramway construction and operations, forestry, water supply and purification, sanitation, wagon-erecting and veterinary services.

Growing protests by Black Canadians and the need for manpower in Europe led to the creation of No. 2 Construction Battalion on 5 July 1916. The battalion was a segregated unit comprising soldiers of Black ancestry. It was to be raised and trained in Pictou, Nova Scotia, for service overseas in response to Britain's request for more railway and construction troops. The unit drew recruits from across Canada and also included soldiers from the USA and the British West Indies.

After training in Canada, No. 2 Construction Battalion arrived in England in the spring of 1917. While some men joined combat units, the battalion was assigned to the Canadian Railway Troops. At that time, the Canadian Railway and Forestry units totalled over 30,000 soldiers. The battalion was deployed to Jura, France, where it was assigned to No. 5 Group of the Canadian Forestry Corps.



They were stationed in the Jura Mountains at Lajoux and worked mainly to harvest and mill timber. Their product was shipped to the front to build trenches, camps and railways. The soldiers were also employed in water supply, trench construction, camp construction and repair, and railway construction and operations.

The No. 2 Construction Battalion soldiers served proudly and honourably during the Great War. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission notes that at least 15 men of that unit died while in service in France or the United Kingdom. Commanded mainly by white

officers, the men of No. 2 Construction Battalion faced segregation during their deployment. Still, their patriotism and dedicated service helped break down racial barriers and paved the way for Black Canadians to enlist freely during the Second World War and subsequent conflicts.

On 9 July 2023, Prime Minister Trudeau apologized for the historic discrimination towards the unit. 4 Engineer Support Regiment has been designated as the 'perpetuating unit' of No 2 Construction Battalion. This ensures the unit is honoured and celebrated as part of our Canadian Military Engineer heritage.