

DCCBA mark national apology for No. 2 Construction Battalion

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Dufferin County Canadian Black Association (DCCBA) marked a national apology for the No. 2 Construction Battalion this weekend with a in-person viewing of the live-stream.

Local residents gathered at Streams Community Hub on Saturday (July 9) to witness the formal apology to the descendants of No. 2 Construction Battalion members, who faced anti-Black racism during and after the First World War.

“Having the apology from the Government of Canada, it means tremendous value to the black community, and in particular, to those descendants of the No. 2 Construction Battalion soldiers,” said Alethia O’Hara Stephenson, DCCBA founder and president. “As a black individual, for me, hearing the words ‘I am sorry’ speaks volumes and hearing the Prime Minister use the words anti-black racism, which people often shy away from, is important to be able to tackle the issue and address it. Otherwise, we will never be able to get beyond to a space of reparation and healing.”

At the ceremony held in Truro, N. S., Prime Minister Justin Trudeau offered an apology to the descendants of the battalion’s 600 members, 106 years after the unit formed.

Trudeau said he was there to apologize for the appalling way the patriots were treated, for the overt racism of turning black volunteers away, for not letting black service members to fight alongside their white compatriots, and for denying them care and support.

“Among the most selfless things a person can do is stand up and volunteer to fight for their country. to risk your life to defend your values and your loved ones is an act of extraordinary bravery, of honour, of sacrifice, of loyalty,” said Trudeau.

“We cannot and we will not ever let what happened to No. 2 Construction Battalion happen again in ways large or small,” said Trudeau. “And we cannot let the service of any member of our forces ever be overlooked or forgotten.”

During the First World War, hundreds of Black men in Canada were turned away when they volunteered to fight overseas in what was considered a white man’s war.

After two years of protests, the Canadian military approved the formation of a segregated labour battalion in 1916, in response to an urgent need for military labour units. The No. 2 Construction Battalion is the first and only all-Black battalion-sized formation in Canadian history.

The No. 2 Construction Battalion members service in the war effort was invaluable as they cut the lumber used in trenches, railways, and even aircraft.

In November of 2021, the Town of Shelburne installed a memorial plaque in honour of the No. 2 Construction Battalion at the community garden located at Fiddle Park. The initiative was spearheaded by Deputy Mayor Steve Anderson.

“Every Remembrance Day, the reason we acknowledge the veterans is because of the ultimate sacrifices that they have made. The unfortunate thing is there are certain individuals who didn’t get the recognition that they deserve, and that’s sad,” said Anderson. “They too have laid their lives down; they too have made the ultimate sacrifice, and the world needs to know the role that all Canadians have played when it comes to this great country.”

Trudeau announced that next year, during Black History Month, the Royal Canadian Mint will be issuing a pure silver collectors coin in honour of the No. 2 Construction Battalion.