FEBRUARY IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH

CANADA SENT ALL-BLACK MILITARY BATTALION OVERSEAS

No. 2 Construction Battalion members in Nova Scotia pose before leaving for France in the spring of 1917.

Jules Xavier
Shilo Stag

Tracing her family ancestry has led Ginger Lamoureux to discover her great-grandfather served in the Great War — specifically the No. 2 Construction Battalion.

"I have a sister who was given up for adoption and we have found each other and reconnected over the last 12 years," recalled Lamoureux, who is the Base's sports and recreation co-ordinator. "We have been sharing some of the information about our family since then and this is a continuation of that bonding we have been lucky to build upon."

This sharing of family information provided her with plenty of family tree fodder, including locating rare photos in the form of large format black and white negatives. Among them is a now cherished photograph of her great-grandfather Cpl Damascus Virgil, and grandfather Owen Virgil. Born on Dec. 9, 1913, Owen was just three when his father left for France.

As a detective researching for your great-grandfather's life, what did you learn about him?

"This has been an interesting adventure so far with much more to learn. The more we discover the more questions there are to answer. I learned that my great-grandfather seems to have had a sense of duty and as he served not only in the First World War for Canada, but in the Spanish American War prior to that while still living in the United States.

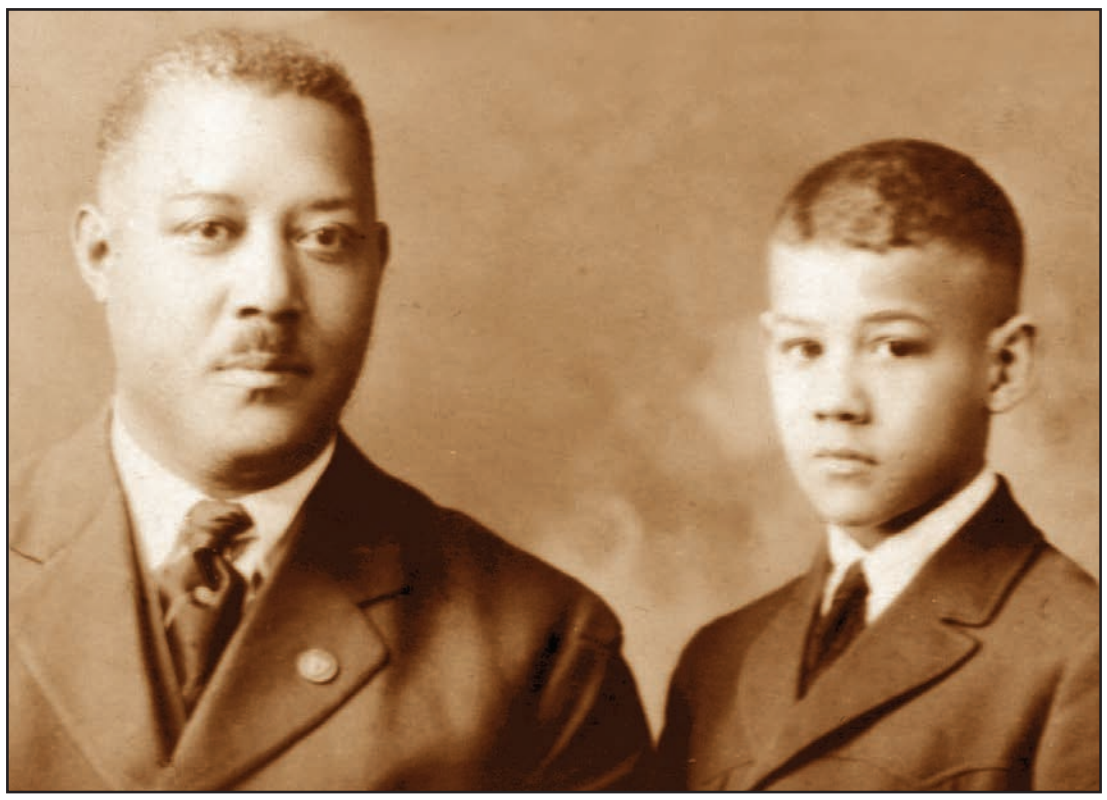
"I discovered he was a cook both in his military career, but also in his civilian one having worked in that capacity with the railroad. I discovered he was very progressive for his time; he was in an inter-racial marriage helping to raise his wife's kids from a previous marriage. He was a family man committed to providing for his family sending home more than what he kept for himself during the Great War.

"I discovered he immigrated to Canada in 1904 and by 1917 he was enlisted in Canada's only all-coloured battalion, that he lived in many parts of this country including Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec."

Cpl Virgil enlisted in the Spanish-American War in Savannah, Georgia on Aug. 8, 1899. The Spanish-American War was fought between the United States and Spain from 1898 to 1902. Hostilities began in the aftermath of the internal explosion of USS Maine in Havana Harbour in Cuba, leading to USA intervention in the Cuban War of Independence. Discharged June 30, 1901

While American soldiers deployed to Cuba, Guam and Puerto Rico, Cpl Virgil was sent to San Isidro, Nueva Ecija in the Philippines He was among 252 soldiers and 11 officers with 24th infantry, assigned to 49th volunteer infantry, E Coy. He was discharged on June 30, 1901.

How did Lamoureux learn Cpl Virgil was part of No. 2 Construction Battalion?



Ginger Lamoureux's great-grandfather Cpl Damascus Virgil with son Owen.
Photo supplied Lamoureux family archives

"Learning he was a part of No. 2 Construction Battalion was part of our journey of trying to discover more about my great-grandfather. My uncle had done some research years ago and we knew he had served for the USA when he was still living there so I decided to look into the First World War as I knew so many men had been conscripted to serve," she said.

"When I did a *Google* search I discovered there was a military file for him and, not only that, but it had been digitized so I was able to download the whole file. To my surprise I found he signed up to serve his country prior to conscription and he served two years for his country. As I was doing this research along with my family, we heard the reports on *CBC* about the No. 2 Construction Battalion and were joking wouldn't that be astonishing if he was a part of that group only to discover a day or so later looking through the military personnel file more closely that he was in fact a part of that group of history making men."

Black soldiers like Cpl Virgil have played a major role in Canada's military history for more than 200 years. They helped the British fight off the Americans in the War of 1812, assisted in stopping the rebellion in Upper Canada in 1837. They travelled to South Africa to fight in the Boer War from 1899 to 1902.

Like so many others swept up in the patriotism that the First World War initially brought on, young black Canadians were eager to serve King and country. At the time, however, the prejudiced attitudes of many of the people in charge of military enlistment made it very difficult for these men to join the Canadian Army.

Despite the barriers, some black Canadians did manage to join up during the opening years of the war — they wanted the chance to do their part on a larger scale, however, and pressured the government to do so.

On July 5, 1916, the No. 2 Construction Battalion was formed in Pictou, Nova Scotia — the first large Black military unit in Canadian history. Recruitment took place across the country and more than 600 men were eventually accepted, most from Nova Scotia, with others coming from New Brunswick, Ontario, the prairies and even some from the United States.

The segregated battalion was tasked with non-combat support roles. After initial service in Canada, Cpl Virgil's battalion boarded the SS Southland bound for Liverpool, England in March 1917. Its members were sent to eastern France later in 1917, where they served honourably with the Canadian Forestry Corps.

There they helped provide the timber required to maintain trenches on the front lines, as well as helped construct roads and railways. After the end of the First World War on Nov. 11, 1918, Cpl Virgil sailed to Halifax in early 1919 to return to civilian life and his unit was officially disbanded in 1920.

See **GREAT** page 7