

THE CANADIAN FORESTRY CORPS IN WW1

“Sawdust Fusiliers”

by Judith Elson

Active: 14 November 1916 - 1920; 1940 - 1945

During the First World War huge quantities of wood were needed on the Western Front: to shore up trench walls and line muddy trench floors; to make stakes for barbed wire fences; to construct corduroy roads over muddy terrain; to build shelters, hangars, military buildings. Traditionally, Britain obtained timber from North America, Scandinavia, Russia, but attacks from German U-boats and the critical need for supplies such as food and ammunition on cargo ships made it virtually impossible to import timber into Britain.

Britain had plenty of suitable trees but lacked experienced men to cut and trim them. On February 16, 1916, Andrew Bonar Law, the British Colonial Secretary, formally asked the Duke of Connaught, Governor-General of Canada, if Canada would provide the manpower necessary to cut and process timber in England. By March 1, 1916, the Canadian Government had responded by creating the 224th Battalion, dedicated to harvesting and processing timber resources overseas. Another three battalions were recruited in the next fifteen months.

Initially, the British Government requested 1000 men. Another 2000 were requested in May, and a further 2000 in November. By the end of the year, 11 companies of Canadian lumbermen were working in Britain, with another 3 companies working in France, a total of 3038 Canadians.

On March 17, 1916, the Canadian Government authorized the creation of a Nova Scotia forestry contingent of 525 men: The Nova Scotia Forestry Draft. On July 4, 1916, the first recruits sailed for England on the White Star transport *Justicia*. Within a month, these recruits were divided amongst other forestry units operating in England, Scotland and France.

The Forestry Corps established its headquarters in Windsor Great Park, close to Windsor Castle. Among trees they claim to have felled in the Park was the “William the Conqueror Oak” 38feet in circumference and large enough to be 1000 years old (William the Conqueror reigned 1066 - 1087; he built the first castle at Windsor). As no saw was capable of cutting the tree from outside, Canadian lumbermen dug a hole into the trunk large enough to allow one man to pull the saw from inside the tree.

The Canadian lumbermen brought machinery and equipment with them, to save time and money setting up sawmills to process the harvested lumber. Horses were used to haul the logs to the sawmills. Before departing for home, the men constructed a log cabin near Windsor Castle as a memorial to their wartime efforts.

In France, the Forestry Corps began harvesting timber in Normandy in September, 1916. Their areas of work spread across France as the Front moved forward. They were often operating immediately behind the British and French front lines and came under enemy fire. In March 1918, German forces launched a major offensive in a final attempt to break the stalemate on the Western Front. An urgent appeal by military commanders to the Forestry Corps to provide 500 men for combat was met by almost 1300 volunteers for infantry duty.

By the end of the war, thousands of Canadians had served in the Corps. It is estimated that Canadian lumbermen produced 70% of all lumber used by Allied forces on the Western Front, a vital contribution to their successful war effort. Many members were underage volunteers who had lied about their age in order to be accepted for service overseas. The legal age to serve in combat was 19, but the Forestry Corps enabled them to serve their country in comparative safety in Britain.

THE CANADIAN FORESTRY CORPS AT STOVER, DEVON, ENGLAND

The county of Devon is in the south-west of England. The first group of 250 “Sawdust Fusiliers”, as they came to be called, to be sent anywhere in Britain was sent to Stover Park in 1916; they left in November 1917. The estate of Stover Park had many fine old trees which were soon providing timber of all kinds for the front. Local people welcomed the Canadians warmly. They were very curious about them and enjoyed fetes and sports days when the visitors demonstrated their skills in logging, baseball, canoeing and First Nations’ ceremonies. Several Canadian men married local women and stayed in Devon after the war.

As part of the “Devon Remembers Heritage Project”, a life-size wooden carving, commissioned by “Devon Remembers” and created by sculptor Andrew Frost, has been installed beside the Stover Heritage Trail near Newton Abbot. It depicts two members of the Canadian Forestry Corps with one of the horses they relied on to work the forest. The horse and officer are made of cedar and the forester sitting down is made of oak. The timber was sourced by the artist in northern England. The carvings were made by Andrew Frost, based in Derbyshire, and took about 6 weeks to make. The cost was approximately 7,000 pounds (8,750 Canadian dollars). The official unveiling was held on September 1, 2018.

