Answering the Call to Serve their (Acadian) Nation: The Volunteers of the 165th Battalion, 1911-1917

GREGORY KENNEDY*

Little has been written about Acadian volunteers to the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) during the First World War. This article offers a detailed profile of the volunteers of the 165th (Acadian) Battalion, created as part of a larger national initiative in 1916 to boost recruiting by appealing to specific regional and ethnic identities. However, recruiting for this unit fell short, as it did across Canada in 1916, and it was disbanded in 1917. The 885 volunteers were largely drawn from Francophone counties in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Longitudinal analysis linking them to their military records and the 1911 Canadian Census provides detailed information about their origins, occupations, and family situations. The volunteers were broadly representative of Acadian rural society, but disproportionately drawn from highly mobile and single young men from southeastern New Brunswick who had moved to Moncton in search of work. Comparing them to volunteer members of the 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion and the CEF as a whole provides new insights into the difficulties of voluntary recruitment for the CEF.

On n’a guère écrit au sujet des Acadiens qui se sont engagés volontairement dans le Corps expéditionnaire canadien (CEF) pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. Le présent article trace un portrait détaillé des volontaires du 165e Bataillon (acadien), créé en 1916 dans le cadre d’un vaste projet national destiné à stimuler le recrutement en suscitant l’intérêt de groupes dotés d’une identité régionale ou ethnique particulière. Le recrutement pour cette unité s’est cependant tari, comme ce fut le cas dans tout le Canada en 1916, de sorte que l’unité a été démantelée en 1917. Les 885 volontaires provenaient en grande partie des comtés francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick et de la Nouvelle-Écosse. Une analyse longitudinale

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les liant à leur dossier militaire et au recensement du Canada de 1911 donne des renseignements détaillés sur leur origine, leur profession et leur situation familiale. Les volontaires étaient largement représentatifs de la société rurale acadienne, mais il s’agissait de manière disproportionnée de jeunes hommes célibataires, très mobiles, provenant du sud-est du Nouveau-Brunswick qui avaient déménagé à Moncton pour y trouver du travail. La comparaison de ces volontaires à ceux du 22e Bataillon (canadien-français) ainsi qu’au CEC dans son ensemble donne un nouvel éclairage sur les difficultés entourant le recrutement de volontaires pour le CEC.

THE CENTENARY of the First World War witnessed a welcome diversity of innovative perspectives and numerous new studies of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and other aspects of Canada’s experience of the conflict. Unsurprisingly, there remains a divide between military specialists interested in the operational history of the CEF and social historians concerned with reconstituting the experiences of soldiers, their families, and other Canadians. Mark Humphries appeals for a crossing of this divide and notes the ways in which, by “emphasizing national narratives, the importance of commemoration, and the unifying aspects of military service, while minimizing the significance of divisions defined by ‘race,’ class, gender, and region, we continue to implicitly cast the Great War as a nation-building event.”¹ Amy Shaw adds that patriotism, shaped initially as duty to Britain, resonated differently across various regions and communities.² Indeed, almost two-thirds of the volunteers for the first two Canadian contingents of the CEF were born in Great Britain; it took conscription to create a slight majority (51.2%) of Canadian-born soldiers in the CEF overseas by the end of the war.³ Minority groups and, in particular, French Canadians, were underrepresented amongst CEF volunteers. Most scholars accept the figure of about thirty-five thousand French Canadians in the CEF, between 5% and 6% of its total strength, at a time when they composed about 30% of the total Canadian population.⁴ Robert Brown and Donald Loveridge established that across Canada a little over 12% of the military age group (males fifteen to forty-four years of age in 1911) had enlisted in infantry battalions and embarked for overseas service before implementation of the Military Service Act (conscription) in 1917. The figure was under 5% in Québec.⁵

There is a longstanding historiographical debate about the reasons for this proportionally low French Canadian voluntary enlistment rate. In addition to feeling less attachment to Great Britain, Jean Martin emphasizes that most French Canadians had been living in North America for several generations and no longer had any significant ties to France either. Desmond Morton has offered the more pragmatic rationale that many French Canadians were more sedentary, marrying young and staying on their family farms. Indeed, C. A. Sharpe found that enlistment rates were lower in all provinces with large rural populations. Another practical explanation is that there were few French-language units authorized for the CEF; in fact, there were none in the first contingent and only eight throughout the First World War. Coupled with limited French Canadian participation in Canada’s prewar military (either the Permanent Force or the Non-Permanent Active Militia), there were thus few opportunities to attract French Canadian volunteers. In short, there were many factors to explain lower enlistment rates in Québec. These practical explanations have sometimes been overshadowed by the debates over conscription, which split across the linguistic divide and antagonized national differences.

Jean Martin has further argued, however, that historians have greatly underestimated voluntary French Canadian participation in the CEF because they have not adequately considered French minority groups living in other provinces. In a provocative article, he asserted that the figure of thirty-five thousand French Canadians should be doubled to seventy thousand as a minimum. Elsewhere, Martin admitted that it is difficult to distinguish Francophones from other recruits using the information in the military attestation papers, notably because:

On peut seulement deviner, supposer, qu’un soldat qui porte un nom et un prénom clairement français, dont les parents portent aussi des noms et prénoms français et qui vivent dans une région francophone, sont très probablement des Francophones. C’est une méthode très approximative.

He nevertheless believes Francophone minorities were more likely to volunteer than French Canadians living in Québec due to both their greater mastery of English and higher social pressures from living in close proximity to an

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Many of these volunteers are invisible to us today, as they served with local Anglophone units. Steve Marti has demonstrated that many French Canadians “rallied to support the war as a means of securing protection against further marginalization.” Military service became a way of protecting their cultural identity, although their efforts were generally diminished or ignored by their English Canadian neighbours.

This article offers a detailed profile of the men who volunteered for the 165th (Acadian) Battalion. Acadian elites spoke out in favour of the war and actively lobbied for the creation of their own national battalion. It was finally established in December 1915, with a headquarters in Moncton and recruiting depots in Edmundston, Caraquet, Meteghan, and Antigonish. The depot locations were deliberately chosen for their proximity to Francophone regions of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The following table shows some general population statistics from the 1911 Canadian Census with regard to the Maritime Provinces and their French-speaking minorities.

Table 1: Maritime Provinces and Population of French Ethnic Origin in 1911

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>French Ethnic Origin</th>
<th>Proportion of the Total Population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Brunswick</td>
<td>351 889</td>
<td>98 795</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia</td>
<td>492 338</td>
<td>51 919</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Edward Island</td>
<td>93 728</td>
<td>13 124</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Of course, not everyone of French ethnic origin would have identified as Acadian. People moved around and there would have been immigrants from Québec and even a few from France. Similarly, Jean-Pierre Gagnon has shown that some of the volunteers for the 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion recruited in Québec had in fact been born or previously resided in the Maritime Provinces.

We should also be mindful that there were distinct Francophone cultural identities, notably in the Madawaska region englobing parts of Québec, New Brunswick, and Maine. Nevertheless, most Francophones in the Maritime Provinces saw themselves as Acadian. After a long period of isolation, the later nineteenth century bore witness to a political, religious, and social movement dubbed the Acadian Renaissance that included national conventions, the founding of colleges, newspapers, and community organizations, as well as the election of Acadian political representatives. The nationalist discourses of Acadian elites and the

14 Martin, Un siècle d’oubli, p. 95.
patriotic songs that became popular at the beginning of the twentieth century testify to a growing sense of common identity and a defining search for greater recognition and language rights. The 1911 Canadian Census not only provides, in its terms, the “racial or tribal origin” of the population, it further indicates the “languages commonly spoken” by each individual. In short, although our definitions will never be perfect, it is possible to go much further than the surname analysis used by Jean Martin to approximate French identity in the attestation papers. For the purposes of this article, the term “Acadian” will be used generally for the Francophone volunteers of the 165th Battalion. This unit was, after all, created as a distinctly “Acadian” battalion.

Voluntary recruitment for the CEF had proceeded with little difficulty for the first two contingents. The government increased the authorized strength of the CEF to 150,000 in July 1915, to 250,000 at the end of October, and finally to 500,000 at the end of the year. But the enrolment numbers started to decline in the summer of 1915, so new measures were introduced to attract more soldiers. For example, the height requirement was reduced from five feet three inches to five feet two inches, and the regulation requiring a married man to produce his wife’s written consent before enrolment was cancelled. The 165th Battalion was one of thirty-nine “special identity” battalions created in the hopes of bringing in more recruits from communities thought to be underrepresented in the ranks. The initial results were promising. Over 110,000 men were put in uniform between December 1915 and March 1916. This included 885 volunteers for the 165th (Acadian) Battalion. However, total enlistments dropped precipitously, from nearly 34,000 in March 1916 to fewer than 8,000 in July. Between July 1916 and October 1917, a mere 2,810 men were raised and sent overseas for the infantry. With regards to the thirty-nine “special identity” battalions, only ten reached full strength, six were disbanded, and the others remained understrength. Desertion became rampant in the summer of 1916, and medical discharges reduced the numbers further, suggesting that some of the volunteers should not have been accepted in the first place. The result was that these units were subsumed into previously organized battalions. The 165th Battalion was no exception. After recruiting across the Maritime Provinces and training in Valcartier in 1916, the unit left for England with just 532 men in March 1917. It was soon disbanded and its members sent to the 13th Reserve Battalion. Most of the soldiers ended up in the Canadian Forestry Corps (CFC), although a few served with the 26th (New Brunswick) Battalion or other front-line units. The only unit history of the 165th Battalion, written by

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Claude Léger in 2001, notes that the unit “ne rapporta à l’Acadie aucune gloire mémorable des champs de bataille européens.”

An analysis of the volunteers of this unit provides useful insights on several subjects. First, it represents a contribution to Acadian history. The 165th Battalion was one of many Acadian national projects, and it is possible to determine who responded to the appeal to create a distinctly Acadian unit. Second, the 165th Battalion offers the unique opportunity to study a unit almost entirely composed of French Canadians from outside Québec. The detailed study of the soldiers of the 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion undertaken by Jean-Pierre Gagnon permits a fruitful comparison of results that will suggest, notably, that French Canadian volunteers in Québec and Acadia came disproportionately from a particular social class of young, underemployed men of rural origins looking for work in urban centres.

Of course, it is also possible to compare the general characteristics of these volunteers with those of the ranks of the CEF as a whole. Third, the records of the 165th Battalion include not only a nominal roll of those who embarked for England in March 1917, but also an official register of deserters and a photographic album from 1916. As a result, it is possible to add the 318 other volunteers who did not go overseas, people who are typically lost in traditional unit histories. In this sense, the article examines who volunteered, and not just who ultimately fought (or chopped wood) in France. Finally, the results in some cases confirm and in other cases nuance our understanding of recruiting and training throughout the CEF during this crucial time between the successful recruitment of the first two contingents and the introduction of the Military Service Act in August 1917. For example, the data for the 165th Battalion indicates that while historians are aware that there were many underage soldiers serving, they have not necessarily realized the extent of the problem.

**Methodology**

The database used for this study was assembled by combining the list of 532 soldiers of the 165th Battalion sent overseas in 1917 with those found in other sources. Each of the 885 volunteers was then linked to their military service files, starting with their attestation papers. This was possible due to the digitization project conducted by Library and Archives Canada. The files for nine soldiers could not be found. Next, the online genealogical website Ancestry was used to search for and consult digitized originals of the volunteers’ entries in the 1911 Canadian Census. Linking back to these records offers significant advantages to better know and understand the origins and characteristics of the volunteers. But this approach is time consuming and not without its pitfalls. It was not possible to find all of the soldiers in the census. Since many of them had left home in search of work, either temporarily or permanently, they might not be reported

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by the head of household and so went unrecorded by the enumerators. Some of them can be found in the 1910 United States census. An even bigger challenge was the inconsistent spelling of French names by military recruiters, census takers, and those doing transcriptions for Ancestry. Minor errors could sometimes be corrected by checking the original census sheets. However, volunteers with common names living in larger communities could be very difficult to identify with certainty. Some transcription errors were so egregious that it was simply impossible to get the right results. Another factor was that the recruits themselves did not always provide accurate information when they enlisted. At least a few soldiers gave false names or made up information about their family origins. For example, Joseph Bouchard, a perennial troublemaker who was absent without leave on at least four occasions, revealed to his military supervisor near the end of the war that his true name was Amable Beauséjour. In total, despite these many obstacles, 581 (66%) of the 885 soldiers were successfully matched to their entries in the 1911 Canadian (or 1910 American) Census. It is worth pointing out that the success rate was somewhat higher for the volunteers who proceeded overseas; those who deserted or were medically discharged before embarking for England were more likely to have falsified details upon enlistment and, as a result, were sometimes harder to link. It is also likely that those who were more sedentary, born and residing in the same communities, are somewhat over-represented amongst the 581 results because they were easier to find and verify. In general, the effort to identify and link volunteers to their historical records resulted in the creation of a robust and comprehensive database supporting many forms of statistical analysis.

**General Characteristics of the 165th Battalion**

With the aid of previous studies, it is possible to compare the general characteristics of the 165th Battalion with that of the CEF as a whole and with other units such as the 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion. Since these other studies only include the soldiers who went overseas, the results for the 165th Battalion used here are restricted to the 555 volunteers who served overseas (532 who went with the 165th Battalion, and a few others who followed with other units later). Similarly, it is important to underline that the statistics refer to volunteers and do not include those conscripted later under the Military Service Act.

In general, French Canadians were significantly younger than their Anglophone counterparts in the CEF. This was particularly true of Acadian volunteers. Similarly, in a recent study of a sample of one hundred Acadian soldiers serving in the first two contingents of the CEF (that is, recruited in 1914 and 1915), Mélanie Desjardins determined an average age of 23.7 years. Not surprisingly, this meant that an even higher proportion of the recruits were single at the time of their enrolment. What is most striking about the data with regards to age is the very high proportion of Acadian soldiers less than twenty years old. Desjardins’ results were more in line with Gagnon’s, with one in four volunteers under the age of twenty. Gagnon’s research further suggests that the average age

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The proportion of youths aged seventeen to nineteen recruited into the 22nd Battalion nearly doubled from 1914 through 1917.\(^{26}\) There are other parallels. For example, the vast majority of the volunteers in both units were born in Canada, and more than one-third declared their occupation as manual labourer. Both statistics are much higher than for the CEF as a whole, suggesting a particular French Canadian trend of young, unskilled workers joining up. However, the results for the 165th Battalion are unique with regards to the proportion with previous military service. Even the figure of 13% is greatly inflated, because over half of this group was simply reporting a previous and recent enlistment in another unit of the CEF. Transfers from other Maritime battalions had been authorized for Acadians wanting to join the 165th Battalion.\(^{27}\)

Desjardins found that 22% of the Acadian volunteers in 1914 and 1915 had served with the militia compared with just 7% of these later Acadian recruits in 1916. It seems that most of those with previous military experience who wanted to enlist had already done so by the time the 165th Battalion was created.

As previously explained, the records for the 165th Battalion enable the addition of those volunteers who were ultimately discharged or deserted before being sent overseas. The following table offers a comparison between this group (318) and those who served in Europe (555), as well as the total combined statistics for the unit as a whole.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>165th Battalion</th>
<th>22nd Battalion</th>
<th>CEF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion born in Canada</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age at enrolment</td>
<td>22.3 years</td>
<td>24.3 years</td>
<td>26.3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion less than 20 years old at enrolment</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of soldiers who were single</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion with previous military service</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion declaring occupation as farmer</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion working as unskilled labourers (manouvriers)</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


of volunteers was diminishing as the war went on; the proportion of youths aged seventeen to nineteen recruited into the 22nd Battalion nearly doubled from 1914 through 1917.\(^{26}\) There are other parallels. For example, the vast majority of the volunteers in both units were born in Canada, and more than one-third declared their occupation as manual labourer. Both statistics are much higher than for the CEF as a whole, suggesting a particular French Canadian trend of young, unskilled workers joining up. However, the results for the 165th Battalion are unique with regards to the proportion with previous military service. Even the figure of 13% is greatly inflated, because over half of this group was simply reporting a previous and recent enlistment in another unit of the CEF. Transfers from other Maritime battalions had been authorized for Acadians wanting to join the 165th Battalion.\(^{27}\)

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There are few significant differences in the characteristics of the two groups, which is interesting in and of itself because it suggests that those who stayed and those who left were nearly indistinguishable from each other. In some cases, it is possible to deduce the reasons behind the departure. For example, some

\(^{26}\) From 17% to 32.8%. See Gagnon, *Le 22e bataillon*, pp. 329-330.

\(^{27}\) The transfers were often held up by the other unit Commanding Officers who were reluctant to lose recruits. An Acadian newspaper sounded the alarm about this problem in, “Notre Bataillon acadien,” *L’Évangéline*, March 15, 1916. The 233rd Battalion (Canadiens-Français du Nord-Ouest) in Manitoba reported the same challenge, with other units refusing to allow Francophone soldiers already in their ranks to transfer to the new Francophone unit. See Marti, “Embattled Communities,” pp. 108-109.
Anglophones and a handful of recent immigrants from Italy and Russia were among the recruits who enlisted with the 165th Battalion only to quit a short time later. Not surprisingly, they did not find their place in this Francophone, Catholic unit. In general, deserters tended to be slightly older, and were more often (though still rarely) married with family responsibilities. Interestingly, they also came disproportionately from southeastern New Brunswick. Desertion was a common problem with the units recruiting across Canada in 1916. Morton estimates that one in four quit their units after a short time, while Brown and Loveridge highlight the increased rates of desertion and discharges throughout the summer of 1916 due to a burgeoning national economy offering better job prospects and wages.

The 165th Battalion’s register of deserters includes 193 names or 22% of the total unit, suggesting that Acadian volunteers were no more or less likely to desert than anyone else in 1916. A few of these individuals would ultimately rejoin the unit (voluntarily or after arrest), re-enrol with another CEF unit, or be conscripted. Most, however, made good their escape.

### Enrolling Underage Soldiers

Twenty-five years ago, Desmond Morton emphasized the large number of underage adolescents in the CEF.

Historians have overlooked their service because it has been difficult to distinguish them from their older comrades, since most of these young soldiers lied about their age in order to enlist. A sense of adventure, peer pressure, and fierce patriotism impelled young and old to serve. Most underage soldiers who enlisted were 16 or 17 (and later 18 when age requirements were raised to 19), but at least one cheeky lad enlisted at only 10 years old, and a 12-year-old made it to the trenches.

#### Table 3: Comparison of different groups within the 165th Battalion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Served Overseas</th>
<th>Discharged/Deserted</th>
<th>Unit as a Whole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion born in Canada</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age at enrolment</td>
<td>22.3 years</td>
<td>23.9 years</td>
<td>22.9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion less than 20 years old at enrolment</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of soldiers who were single</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion with previous military service</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion declaring occupation as farmer</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion working as day labourers (manouvriers)</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 165th Battalion Database.


30 Morton, When Your Number’s Up, p. 279.
Recently, historians using the military attestation papers have calculated that about 3% of the CEF, or twenty thousand soldiers, were under the required age of 18 when they enrolled. This is certainly too low, since it is based on official records and does not include those recruits who lied about their age, either with or without the coaxing of recruiting officials. Increasing pressure to recruit and diminishing enlistments in 1916 may have influenced units across Canada to accept more underage volunteers. The attestation papers for the 165th Battalion certainly bear this out; seventy-eight recruits, nearly 10% of the total, declared their age as less than eighteen but were nevertheless permitted to enrol. Four of these men were not yet sixteen years old. Fifteen-year-old Joseph Albert of Gloucester County, New Brunswick, was one of thirteen volunteers eventually discharged for being underage. That left sixty-five others, including another fifteen year old, Alex Chiasson of Inverness County, Nova Scotia, to complete their training and head overseas.

Linking the volunteers to the 1911 Canadian Census provides a way to determine who may have lied about their age. Of course, there may have been occasional mistakes in the birth year and month given in the census, but there was no imperative for people to conceal their true age from the enumerators. The results are astonishing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Age at Enlistment, 165th Battalion</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attestation Papers (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 165th Battalion Database.*

Fully one in four of the volunteers were under age, including over forty who were not yet sixteen! Simple mistakes in the census cannot explain such a significant difference from the attestation paper results, especially given that the margin of error is much less for soldiers in the acceptable age range for military service. Clearly, a significant proportion of the declared eighteen year olds concealed their true age. Using a similar method of linking soldiers to their 1911 Canadian Census records, Gagnon identified 216 youths who lied about their age in order to serve in the 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion, a total of 5% of the unit’s volunteers between 1914 and 1917. Mélanie Desjardins found thirteen

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underage soldiers amongst her sample of one hundred Acadian volunteers signing up in 1914 and 1915.\textsuperscript{33} It appears that Acadians in general, and those volunteering for the 165\textsuperscript{th} Battalion in particular, were much more likely to enlist as adolescents than other French Canadians.

The most egregious case was Charles Freeman Deveau, who was still five months away from his fourteenth birthday when he signed up in June 1916 at Digby, Nova Scotia. He was the oldest son of George Deveau, a shipyard carpenter in the fishing village of Mavillette.\textsuperscript{34} Did Charles run away or did his parents knowingly support his enlistment? At fourteen, Félix Paulin may have enlisted to escape poverty. His father was dead and Félix lived with his widowed mother in the care of his eldest brother, Xavier. The entire household of seven people relied on the $60 in annual wages Xavier could bring in as an unskilled labourer. At five feet nine inches tall and with a chest measurement of 36 inches, Félix was bigger than many of the other volunteers, which may explain why he was accepted into the unit without fuss. Still, the military authorities must have become aware of his youth; he was held back and only deployed to England in 1918, where he remained in a reserve brigade. Of course, it was more common for sixteen and seventeen year olds to conceal their true age in an attempt to get past the recruiters, and most of them would have been eighteen by the time they reached the front. Additional research is needed into other units recruiting in 1916 in order to provide a point of comparison across the CEF.

Volunteers who were too old could also be found throughout the CEF.\textsuperscript{35} There was just one in the 165\textsuperscript{th} Battalion according to official records, but the 1911 Census reveals that there were in fact eight. Ovila Richer was from a rural community on the island of Montréal called Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue. In 1911, he worked on a commercial farm and reported a considerable annual salary of almost $1,000. Richer lived with his wife and one daughter; his other children had already grown up and moved away. A large man with a chest measurement of 47 inches—the largest in the unit—this fifty-three year old travelled to New Brunswick in order to enrol in the 165\textsuperscript{th} Battalion. Perhaps he had already been rejected by the local units who knew him. The motivation of Albert Pothier is a little easier to deduce. His wife had died sometime after 1911 and when he learned that his only son Charles had enlisted, he followed suit a month after so that they could serve together. Basil Johnson of Kent County, New Brunswick, was a fifty-seven-year-old customs officer. Standing over six feet tall, he was initially accepted on condition that he become a bandsman. He was later discharged for various ailments including poor eyesight and arteriosclerosis. Johnson was determined to go overseas, however, and re-enlisted with the Nova Scotia Forestry Corps in May 1917, claiming that he was only forty-five. He served in the 71\textsuperscript{st} Company of the Canadian Forestry

\textsuperscript{33} Desjardins, “La maudite guerre,” p. 52.

\textsuperscript{34} The individual cases cited here and elsewhere are drawn from the Military Service Files held by LAC and searchable online: http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/canadian-expeditionary-force.aspx.

\textsuperscript{35} Cook, “He was determined to go,” p. 60.
Corps, suffered from the Spanish flu in October 1918, and was discharged in March 1919 just shy of his sixtieth birthday.

Other Irregular Enrolments
Age was not the only area in which the recruiters sometimes turned a blind eye. Military minimum standards for height and girth could also be ignored in the name of filling the ranks. Nic Clarke explains that CEF medical examinations “were hindered by a number of interrelated factors: the inexperience and/or professional arrogance of some individuals tasked with conducting examinations; the sheer number of men needing to be examined; recruiting practices; and the willingness of recruits, military authorities, politicians, and medical officers to subvert the medical examination for their own ends.”

It appears that the doctors conducting the enrolment medicals for the 165th Battalion missed or overlooked a number of problems.

With regard to height, the standard in 1916 had been reduced to five feet two inches. Girth refers to a chest measurement, with a minimum standard of 33.5 inches. In the 165th Battalion, 30 of the volunteers were not tall enough, and another 232 did not have the required girth. Undoubtedly, these results point to the youth of many of the soldiers. For example, Aubin Gallant of Egmont Bay, Prince Edward Island, stood just over five feet tall and had a chest measurement of only 28 inches. He was seventeen years old. However, not everyone fit the description of an underdeveloped adolescent. Romauld Gauvin of Madawaska County, New Brunswick, was a thirty-two-year-old labourer when he enlisted at five feet one and a half inches tall and with a 32-inch chest measurement. He may simply have been small; military authorities authorized the creation of so-called “bantam” battalions like the 143rd (British Columbia) Battalion in order to permit shorter men to enrol. A smaller girth might also be related to health and nutrition. A larger study of the CEF suggested that many soldiers had only a barely adequate diet before enlistment; those who did not suffer debilitating injuries actually experienced noticeable weight gain during their military service thanks to the plentiful, if not always appetizing, food.

Across Canada, between 5% and 15% of the men enrolled were later deemed unfit to serve by subsequent medical examinations. In the 165th Battalion, this number was even higher, with 145 cases representing almost 17% of the unit’s total strength (and 21% after subtracting those who had deserted). As with the results for underage recruits, it is likely that this problem was worse in 1916 than in the earlier years of the war. We might also wonder if some physically unfit volunteers made it into the ranks anyway. Although the official reason for the transfer of the former 165th Battalion soldiers to the CFC was the apparent

39 Clarke, Unwanted Warriors, p. 50.
familiarity of some Acadians with the lumber industry, it seems likely that the many underage and physically unfit soldiers also influenced the decision. Only sixty of the volunteers had declared an occupation related to forestry, such as carpenters, sawyers, and lumbermen, when they enrolled. Others may have had previous experience working in lumber camps as a seasonal job, but most of the recruits were demonstrably not woodsmen. While the need for manpower was high at the front, support formations like the CFC and railway troops also needed men. Military authorities sent Acadians, some of the “bantam” soldiers, Black members of the No. 2 Construction Battalion, Russians repatriated from the Germans, Chinese workers, and others deemed less suitable for combat to these units, where they could still help the war effort. For example, by the end of the war, there were over 31,000 soldiers and attached labourers working in the CFC.

Across the CEF, many underage or physically deficient men were able to enlist, either due to lax enforcement by recruiters or the sheer determination of men who kept trying at different units until they were accepted. The number was particularly high in the 165th Battalion, as it must have been for other units desperate to recruit in 1916. According to the official statistics recorded in the military attestation papers, whether due to being too young, too old, or of insufficient height or weight, a total of 269 or about 30% of the volunteers should not have been accepted into military service. When the number of underage recruits who lied about their age is added to the count, this figure could be raised to nearly half of the total strength of the unit.

Economic Motivations for Enlistment
There has been considerable historiographical debate over the motivations of CEF volunteers. Desmond Morton has argued that there were more “idealists” than “idlers,” meaning that nationalism and patriotism were stronger motivations for many volunteers than economic incentives. In other words, many Canadians left behind good jobs in order to enlist. On the other hand, Nicholson affirms that unemployment “must be considered a not unimportant factor.” Brown and Loveridge similarly emphasize the general recession and the large number of unemployed men who enlisted in 1914 and 1915, and further suggest that one factor in declining enrolments across Canada in 1916 was a steadily improving national economy, which reduced the pool of available manpower. With regards to the French Canadian volunteers of the 22nd Battalion, Gagnon found large numbers of unemployed or underemployed manual labourers living in urban areas like Québec and Montréal. Was this also true in the 165th Battalion?

40 Marti, “Embattled Communities,” p. 112.
42 Desmond Morton, When Your Number’s Up, 9; Cook, “He was determined to go,” 49.
43 Morton, When Your Number’s Up, 43.
46 Gagnon, Le 22e bataillon, p. 365.
Claude Léger determined that many of the Acadian volunteers worked seasonally in the fishery, on farms, or in the city, but he did not delve further into the soldiers’ occupational data. Indeed, his unit history provides few details about the soldiers and their families.\footnote{Léger, Le bataillon acadien, p. 132.} The following graph shows the jobs declared by the recruits when they enlisted, and their occupations recorded by the 1911 Canadian Census.

**Figure 1:** Declared Occupation by % (Attestation Papers and 1911 Canadian Census)

Source: 165th Battalion Database.

Interpreting this data can be difficult; for example, a farmer could be a farmhand, a smallholder, or the owner of a large, profitable farm. Similarly, a carpenter could be an apprentice or a master artisan, and might specialize in shipbuilding, house construction, or furniture. However, by organizing the results into occupational categories, certain trends become apparent. In their attestation papers, more than one-third of the volunteers simply identified themselves as general labourers. Most of the others declared themselves to be farmers or tradesmen such as carpenters, shoemakers, and cooks. There were also small groups working in Maritime industry sectors including fisheries, saw mills, and mines. Only twenty-six recruits (3% of the total) declared having no employment when they enlisted. Judging by this data alone, we might conclude that most of the volunteers of the 165th Battalion were among Morton’s idealists, giving up civilian employment in order to respond to the patriotic appeal for a national Acadian battalion.

However, the census tells a different story. Of course, given the youth of many of the soldiers concerned, it is not surprising that approximately five years earlier they would not yet have an occupation to declare. About 300 of the volunteers were under sixteen years old when the census was taken, and of these two-
thirds were going to school. Upon turning sixteen, very few Acadian adolescents continued with school; just 8 of 149 future volunteers aged sixteen to nineteen years old in 1911 were attending classes. In many cases, adolescent labour and wage-earning were essential to meeting family subsistence needs. This pressure between education and earning continued into the 1940s, when the government provided an allowance for children going to school. In general, most of the volunteers could be found getting by as farmhands, general labourers, apprentices, and fishermen. Unemployment was considerable; more than one in five had no declared occupation in 1911. It is interesting to note that of those who reported no occupation or were students, the majority later declared that they were general labourers when they enlisted, suggesting that job prospects remained low. Others had moved into small trades or fishing, while only a few had turned to agriculture.

The census does not provide details for farmers, but 131 of the future soldiers earning wages in 1911 also declared a salary. The figures reported in the censuses should be used with caution as they in some cases underestimate total earnings. However, they can still provide a general idea. A typical unskilled labourer in early twentieth-century Canada made $1-2 a day, with workers in the Maritimes making slightly less on average than those living in central Canada. About half of the recruits reported making less than $300 a year, or significantly lower than the regional average. For example, Edward Boudreau worked fulltime at the Bathurst Mines in Gloucester County, New Brunswick, while Jean-François Lagacé was employed at a lumber mill in Edmundston, Madawaska County, New Brunswick. Both men made about $300 a year. Military service offered a base salary of $1.10 a day, as well as a separation allowance of $20 a month for the soldier’s parents or wife, over $600 a year. This does not take into consideration room and board. This would have been a clear economic incentive for many unemployed, underemployed, or low-paid workers.

There were certainly exceptions to this trend. Michael Foran, born in Summerside, Prince Edward Island, was a successful accountant. Charles Pothier was a jeweller and watchmaker in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, while Frank Douthwright was a policeman in Moncton, New Brunswick. Cyriac Dionne of Edmundston, Madawaska County, New Brunswick had the highest recorded salary ($1,000) amongst the future soldiers in 1911. He earned this while working just twenty-five hours a week, forty weeks a year, at a time when many of his comrades were earning far less while working sixty hours a week, fifty to fifty-two weeks a year. Dionne held a highly coveted position as a mail clerk in the public service, and would have had a pension and other benefits as well. Clearly, these individuals remind us that economic incentives alone cannot explain the motivations behind voluntary enlistment in the CEF.

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Migration, Mobility, and Language

As discussed in the introduction, several historians, from Desmond Morton to Jean Martin, have suggested that French Canadians were less likely to voluntarily enlist in the CEF in part because many were established on family farms in rural communities. The 165th Battalion created recruiting depots in Francophone rural areas of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in order to attract these kinds of people. The attestation papers provide a place of birth and a place of residence for each volunteer. Overall, about 52% (449 of 865 soldiers) lived in the same place as they were born when they enlisted. This supports the hypothesis that French Canadians tended to be sedentary, although a few may have moved back home after being abroad.52

Table 5: Mobility of 165th Battalion Volunteers by Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>% with the same declared residence and birthplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Brunswick</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Edward Island</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Québec, US)</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 165th Battalion Database.

The majority of the volunteers from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were sedentary, while most of those travelling to enlist in the 165th Battalion from Prince Edward Island or further away had already left their home communities at some earlier point. Those born or residing in the United States, especially in Maine and Massachusetts, were part of a larger cross-border migration motivated by the search for employment.53 The decision of twenty soldiers residing in the United States to return to New Brunswick in order to enrol in the 165th Battalion demonstrates the important connections that existed across the diaspora. William Comeau, George Albert, and Pierre Morneault travelled together from Frenchville, Maine in order to enlist in New Brunswick. Significantly, all three had previously served in the Canadian Non-Permanent Active Militia. However, this was hardly a prerequisite. Maxime Pelletier and Joseph Dumais had lived their entire lives in Van Buren, Maine, but still chose to make the trip. The ranks of the 165th Battalion also included three volunteers born in Saint Pierre and Miquelon, France. Constant Mahe and Louis Lambert were working in the Inverness Mines when they decided to enlist, while John Burt was working as a telegraph operator in Sydney, Nova Scotia. An exceptional case was Auguste Deltour, also a miner, although working in Pictou County. He was born in Boulogne, France, and indicated that he had previous service in the French Army. Although we might assume that Deltour

52 The reader is reminded of the possibility that sedentary volunteers are slightly overrepresented amongst those that could be successfully linked to the 1911 Census.

felt called to defend his homeland, for unknown reasons he deserted the unit on February 28, 1917, just before it was set to embark for England.

The majority of the volunteers (565 of 885) lived in New Brunswick, which is not surprising since this province had the largest Acadian population (see Table 1). Although over half of them were still living in their birthplace at the time of enlistment, the results also reveal significant mobility in some areas. Thus, while there was little movement in Gloucester and Madawaska Counties, a considerable number of the volunteers born in Kent County had moved to Westmorland County by the time of their enlistment. This was due to the attraction of the City of Moncton, which was emerging as an important railway hub and industrial centre.54

In fact, 164 soldiers, nearly one in five of the total number of volunteers, declared their residence as Moncton when enlisting, yet only 21 had been born there. For example, five of the six soldiers born in Saint-Antoine, a small farming community in Kent County, were residing in Moncton, including the ill-fated Félicien Roy, who would die in a train accident while working as part of the CFC in France. The Acadian volunteers from Nova Scotia seemed less inclined to move to Halifax, the only large urban centre in the province, but there was a similar tendency for young workers to head for larger towns. For example, six of seven soldiers born in the tiny fishing community of Salmon River had moved to Meteghan in Digby County by the time of enlistment.

**Figure 2:** Selected New Brunswick Counties of Birth and Residence (Attestation Papers)

![Figure 2: Selected New Brunswick Counties of Birth and Residence (Attestation Papers)](source: 165th Battalion Database)

In his study of the 22nd Battalion, Gagnon found that its volunteers largely came from urban areas like Montréal (51%) and Québec City (16%). However, a significant proportion of this group had not been born in these cities but had instead travelled there from outlying rural areas in search of work. In fact, the rate of voluntary enrolments, when analyzed in terms of population, reveals that people born in smaller centres like Rimouski, Saint-Jean, and Rivière-du-Loup, made a

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higher proportional contribution to the unit. At first glance, the 165th Battalion was very different due to its less urban character and its more dispersed structure, with several depots across New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. However, there is a parallel trend with the emergence of Moncton as the centre of the recruiting effort due to its burgeoning working-class population. At the same time, by retracing the birthplaces of the volunteers, it is possible to see the contributions of rural municipalities like Caraquet, Richibucto, and Rogersville.

Table 6: Enrolment Rates of the 165th and 22nd Battalions for Select Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Enrolment Rate per 1,000 inhabitants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moncton, NB (165th Bn)</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richibucto, NB (165th Bn)</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogersville, NB (165th Bn)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rimouski, QC (22nd Bn)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caraquet, NB (165th Bn)</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montréal, QC (22nd Bn)</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 165th Battalion Database; 1911 Canadian Census; Gagnon, Le 22e bataillon, p. 362.

Although more research and comparative statistical analysis of available manpower and enrolment rates is necessary, these preliminary results suggest that in at least some Acadian regions, such as southeastern New Brunswick, recruitment for the 165th Battalion was very successful, surpassing the results in Québec. If the Acadian volunteers enrolled into the 145th (Moncton) and 132nd (North Shore) Battalions, also recruiting in the region in 1916, were taken into account, the figures would be even higher.

Jean Martin has suggested that enrolment rates might have been higher in minority French Canadian communities than in Québec because the population would have been more accustomed to English, the language predominantly used in the military. The 1911 Census recorded not only the ethnic origins but also the languages commonly spoken by the inhabitants.

Table 7: Languages Commonly Spoken of the 165th Battalion Volunteers in 1911

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Proportion (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 165th Battalion Database.

55 Gagnon, Le 22e bataillon, p. 362.
56 Martin, Un siècle d’oubli, p. 95.
The 1911 Census records confirm that the 165th Battalion was first and foremost a French-language unit. The majority of the Acadian volunteers were unilingual Francophones, or at least did not commonly speak English. There was certainly a significant bilingual contingent, particularly among those residing in urban areas at the time of their enlistment. Many would have needed knowledge of English to work. Amongst the recruits were a small group of sixty-two Anglophones. Judging by the family surnames as well as their declared regional and ethnic origins, these were not assimilated Acadians who no longer spoke French. The most likely explanation is that these recruits were initially rolled up in the 165th Battalion by mistake. Many of them (twenty-five) deserted, while most of the others eventually transferred to Anglophone units. Additional use of the 1911 Census for other French Canadian units would enable further evaluation of the importance of bilingualism, and might also offer useful data for analyzing linguistic assimilation amongst Francophone minority communities across Canada during the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

The general profile of the 165th (Acadian) Battalion was quite different from the CEF overseas as a whole. The Acadian volunteers were overwhelmingly Canadian-born, nearly half were adolescents, and most of them lacked military experience. The recruits had chiefly rural origins, often growing up on small family farms; a narrow majority were still living in the same community that they were born in when they enlisted. On the other hand, like the 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion, the 165th Battalion drew disproportionately from one of the most mobile sectors of the population—young, unmarried men actively searching for work in urban centres. These recruits, many of whom came from southeastern New Brunswick and gravitated towards the burgeoning urban economy in Moncton, had already left home. Some of them had even spent time in the United States.

It is always difficult to evaluate the motivations of historical actors. Many volunteers must have been influenced by the patriotic rhetoric of statesmen, priests, and newspaper editorialists to create a distinct Acadian battalion. In some cases, established, married heads of household with good jobs—Desmond Morton’s “idealists”—joined the colours. For others, economic incentives were clearly paramount. This is not to say that this second group did not also have personal or patriotic reasons to enlist; after all, not everyone looking for work was willing to join the army. The many letters from Acadian soldiers published in Le Moniteur acadien and L’Évangéline echoed the patriotic sentiments of other CEF soldiers in their desire to do their part and serve Canada. Among many examples, Jérôme Arsenault wrote to his parents that “il faut tous se battre pour son Roi et son pays,” while Félicien Landry emphasized that “tout ce que l’on désire c’est gagner la victoire et que Dieu nous protège pour ce jour afin que l’on puisse retourner au beau Canada.”

Enlistment provided an attractive financial option, and an opportunity to support Acadian nationalism, seek adventure, and perhaps find glory.

It is worth remembering that the recruitment for the Acadian Battalion happened in 1916, at a time when the number of volunteers was dwindling across Canada. Those most keen to enlist had already left, and by this time the initial enthusiasm for the war had waned. The large number of underage and unfit soldiers enrolled into the 165th suggests a certain level of pragmatism but also desperation on the part of the recruiters, who were not only under pressure from military authorities to meet their targets, but also carried the hopes of generating a distinct Acadian unit. It would be interesting to link census and military records for other soldiers of the CEF in order to determine just how systematically underage (and overage) volunteers got by the recruiters. In other words, to what degree was this profile of the 165th Battalion unique as an Acadian unit? As we have seen, the issue was not only age but also physical standards like height and girth. Nic Clarke argues that medical discharges for unfit soldiers were common across the CEF in 1916; in many cases, these volunteers should not have been accepted in the first place. There is something poignant in reconstituting the history of these undersized adolescents putting on a uniform.

This article follows other such historians as Mark Humphries and Amy Shaw in calling for further research into the varied experiences of Canadians during the First World War. While a patriotic, nation-building narrative still underlies some accounts, Steve Marti has shown that many minority groups saw the war as an opportunity to gain greater recognition and rights through military service. Nationalism could have different meanings in these communities. In this case, a Francophone minority group outside Québec successfully lobbied for the creation of its own national unit as part of a larger political, religious, and social movement. Although the unit was ultimately disbanded, with most of its members transferred to the CFC, this should not diminish the willingness of those who volunteered to serve and worked gruelling months in lumber camps to support the war effort. Not everyone survived—several soldiers died in training or work accidents as well as from diseases like influenza. Of course, the 165th Battalion was only one part of the Acadian contribution to the war, as many other Acadians were already serving as individuals or small groups in other units at the front. A few of the volunteers for the 165th Battalion eventually saw combat as well. Aldéric Gallant was initially discharged as medically unfit, but later re-enrolled and fought with the 44th Battalion during the Hundred Days Campaign. Tragically, he fell during the night of November 1, 1918 at the Battle of Valenciennes, killed by artillery fire just ten days before the Armistice.

The value of historical subjects should not be defined by casualty lists and victories. There is little that is glorious about the 165th Battalion, and yet it is worthy of study. For historians of Acadia, this unit offers a fertile terrain for inquiry into the larger Acadian Renaissance as well as for regional socioeconomic, demographic, and migration trends during the early twentieth century. For military

58 Clarke, Unwanted Warriors, p. 41.
Historians, like Jean Martin, interested by French Canadian participation in the CEF, the 165th Battalion offers a unique opportunity to study a Francophone unit composed almost entirely of volunteers born in the Maritime Provinces. In fact, there are several parallels with the socioeconomic study of the 22nd Battalion conducted by Jean-Pierre Gagnon. For example, French Canadian volunteers were generally younger than their Anglophone counterparts in the CEF. Single manual workers already moving between the countryside and urban centres in search of work were disproportionately represented in the ranks. Given the less obvious patriotic connection of these volunteers to Great Britain (or to France), it is unsurprising that economic motivations were more obvious. These results also reinforce the hypothesis of Desmond Morton and C. A. Sharpe that rural communities (and in particular Francophone rural communities) were often more sedentary places where the inhabitants married young. The available pool of single men for the CEF was thus more limited. At the same time, the results for the 165th Battalion diverge from those of Gagnon in several important ways. The Acadian volunteers were considerably younger again, much less likely to have previous military experience, and there was a much more significant cohort of farmers and farmhands as is also seen in the CEF as a whole. Recruitment in rural areas was possible. Further study of Francophone volunteers in Québec, Ontario, and the West could provide worthwhile points of comparison and ultimately suggest different Francophone narratives of the war. Finally, this profile of one of many special units created in late 1915 and 1916 offers rare insights into the challenges of recruiting and training the CEF at this point of the war. For example, the recruitment of underage youths was likely a much greater problem than previously documented across the CEF. In general, the largely forgotten history of the 165th Battalion, which culminated in a few hundred Acadians cutting wood in France with the CFC, offers a wealth of information about the Acadian experience of the war, trends amongst French Canadian volunteers, and the evolution of the CEF as a whole.

59 The author was saddened to learn of the recent death of Jean Martin.