

CURATORIAL REPORT NUMBER 107

**CHARLIE'S WAR:  
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A SOUTH AFRICAN LABOURER  
IN THE CANADIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE, 1917-1918**

by Dr. Kirrily Freeman



## CURATORIAL REPORTS

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Cover image - Private Charlie Some, Collection of Anthony Sherwood

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## Stories and Names

Over the past four years, the centenary of the First World War has been commemorated primarily by listing the names of the dead and by telling the stories of those who served. Marking individual deaths in order to illustrate the magnitude of the loss of life in the First World War has been a feature of its commemoration since the time of the war itself: the Canadian memorial at Vimy lists the 11,285 Canadians killed or missing in France.<sup>1</sup> One hundred years later, this tendency has continued in commemorations the world over: 888,246 ceramic poppies were installed in the moat of the Tower of London to remember Britain's war dead, and 600,000 small clay sculptures were placed in No Man's Land near Ypres to pay tribute to the fallen of that catastrophic battle.<sup>2</sup> In a parallel and complementary effort, museums, libraries, archives, and communities around the world have sought to mark the centenary by collecting and publicizing individual stories and images in order to put a face to the names of the Great War.<sup>3</sup>

In the fall of 2014, a student came to see me about a commemorative workshop he had attended run by the Halifax Public Libraries, in which participants were assigned the military file of a Canadian soldier or nurse with the goal of following that person through his or her service. My student was given Private Charlie Some's service file but struggled to reconcile what he knew and understood about the Great War with what he had learned about Charlie Some's experience. My student soon went on to other things, but Charlie Some's story stayed with me.

Private Some's name is listed with thousands of other war dead in Canada's Book of Remembrance and in the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, yet his war story is different from the ones we tend to hear. He died a violent death in France, but it was outside of battle and likely at the hands of an ally or comrade. Though he fought with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), Charlie Some was not Canadian. Though he joined the No. 2 Construction Battalion and lived in Africville, he was a newcomer to that historic community. When he was hospitalized, it was as a result of civilian encounters.

The project's title is inspired by a cartoon strip by Pat Mills and Joe Colquhoun -- *Charley's War* -- published between 1979 and 1986.<sup>4</sup> *Charley's War* followed the exploits of a working-class British volunteer, Charley Bourne, on the Western Front. Complex and deliberately problematic, *Charley's War* emphasized alienation and morality, and cut against the grain of the heroic narratives of the Great War.<sup>5</sup> Charlie Some and his experience are very different from Charley Bourne and his, and there is much that we do

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/overseas/first-world-war/france/vimy](http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/overseas/first-world-war/france/vimy).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/tower-of-london-remembers/#gs.lk9GzmQ](http://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/tower-of-london-remembers/#gs.lk9GzmQ) and [www.toerisme-ieper.be/en/page/334-360-569/cwrm.html](http://www.toerisme-ieper.be/en/page/334-360-569/cwrm.html)

<sup>3</sup> The Imperial War Museum's "Lives of the First World War" website has collected thousands of war stories. <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org>. Likewise, the BBC, the Library of Congress, and websites like The Memory Project invite the public to share their family histories, photographs and digitized documents: <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/WWI>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.charleyswar.net/>

<sup>5</sup> See Esther MacCallum-Stewart, "The First World War and Comics" (2001).

not know about Charlie Some's life. But the information we do have allows us to reconstruct a life that was at once ordinary and remarkable and, like Pat Mills' cartoon, demands that we broaden our perspective and challenge our understanding of the experiences of enlisted men.

Through this project, I hope to add Charlie Some's story to his name and, in so doing, contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive picture of soldiers' experiences of the First World War. Slices of life experience like Charlie's -- even in their sketchiest form -- have the power to reveal the varied, and sometimes unexpected, connections and currents that shaped the past, and challenge us to reconsider what we know and understand about the First World War.

## Charlie's War

On the night of September 22-23, 1918, Private Charles Some died of wounds in France. Charlie Some did not die in battle or from war injuries; he was murdered on a narrow mountain road in eastern France, stabbed multiple times in the face, chest, back and neck, his throat severed.<sup>6</sup>

|  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
| 1. Number, Rank, Name, and Unit<br>of injured man. 951410 Pte. Some, C.,<br>#2 Can. Construction Coy.  | Date of Casualty.<br>24-9-18 |
| 2. Nature, Location, and Severity<br>of injury. (N.B. Field Ambulance<br>to be notified at once if wound is<br>believed to be self-inflicted.) a knife<br>on face, chest, back & neck of Pte. Some.<br>Throat cut severing the carotid artery &<br>jugular vein & respiratory tract. |                              |

See Attached Statement.  
Numerous incisions which appear to have  
been made by a sharp instrument such as  
a knife on face, chest, back & neck of Pte. Some. Throat  
cut severing the carotid artery & jugular vein & respiratory tract.

*Charles Some*

Figure 1: Service File, Charles Some #931410. RG 150 Box 9149-40, Library and Archives Canada.

Charlie Some's life and death provide an illustration of a soldier's experience in the First World War that differs in significant ways from the Great War stories familiar to most Canadians. Charlie Some, though he served in the Canadian military, was born in the British colony of Natal in southern Africa. The date of his migration to Canada is unknown, but when he arrived in Nova Scotia he married and settled in Africville before enlisting in the No. 2 Construction Battalion in January 1917. On March 25, 1917 Charlie Some embarked with the rest of "the No. 2" on the *SS Southland*, bound for Liverpool, England.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2: *SS Southland* (formerly *Vaderland*)  
<http://www.clydeships.co.uk/view.php?ref=3214>

<sup>6</sup> Service File, Charles Some #931410. RG 150 Box 9149-40, Library and Archives Canada. Although the date of casualty is recorded as September 24, Charlie Some's body was found on September 23rd.

<sup>7</sup> *Vaderland II* (an International Navigation Company ship launched in Glasgow in 1900) was requisitioned as a troop ship and renamed *Southland* in 1915. *Southland* was torpedoed in June 1917 off the coast of Ireland. See [www.theshipslis.com](http://www.theshipslis.com) and [www.clydeships.co.uk](http://www.clydeships.co.uk).



Upon arriving in the UK on April 7, 1917, the No. 2 Construction Company (now reduced from Battalion status) proceeded to Seaford, East Sussex, for training. On May 17, the unit left Seaford for France. Charlie Some remained in England, however, and was admitted to the Canadian Hospital at Etchinghill for treatment for syphilis. During his treatment, Some was attached to the 7<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion (Eastern Ontario) at Seaford. On October 15, 1917 he was transferred to the 17<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion (Nova Scotia), stationed at Bramshott, East Hampshire. On November 28, 1917 while in the Canadian camp at Bramshott, Charlie Some was assaulted and subsequently hospitalized until December 14, 1917.

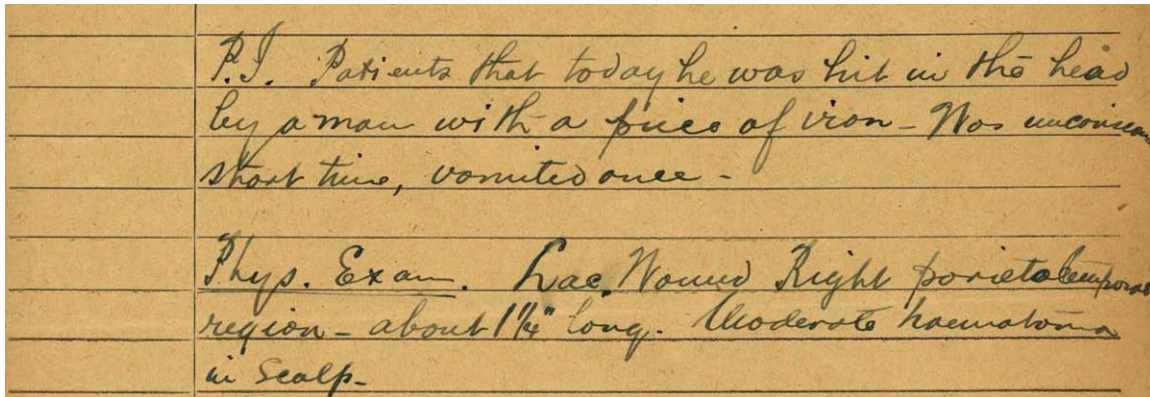


Figure 3: Service File, Charles Some #931410. RG 150 Box 9149-40, Library and Archives Canada.

In April 1918, one year after arriving in England, Charlie Some was transferred to the Canadian Forestry Corps (CFC) Base Depot at Sunningdale, Berkshire. At the end of May 1918 he rejoined the No. 2 Construction Company at the CFC forestry camp in Jura, France.



Figure 4 : CFC camp at La Joux, Jura, France. DND/Carte postale 2.

Within days of arriving at the No. 2 camp at La Joux, Charlie Some began to go absent from his unit. On June 5, 1918 he left his party without permission. He was Absent Without Leave (AWL) between June 30 and July 3, and again between August 25<sup>th</sup> and



27<sup>th</sup>. On September 23, his body was found outside camp on a logging road that leads to the village of Salins. Charlie Some's remains were left in place for two days, before being transported to camp for post mortem. Private Some was buried with full honours in the churchyard at the village of Supt, Jura on September 26, 1918.

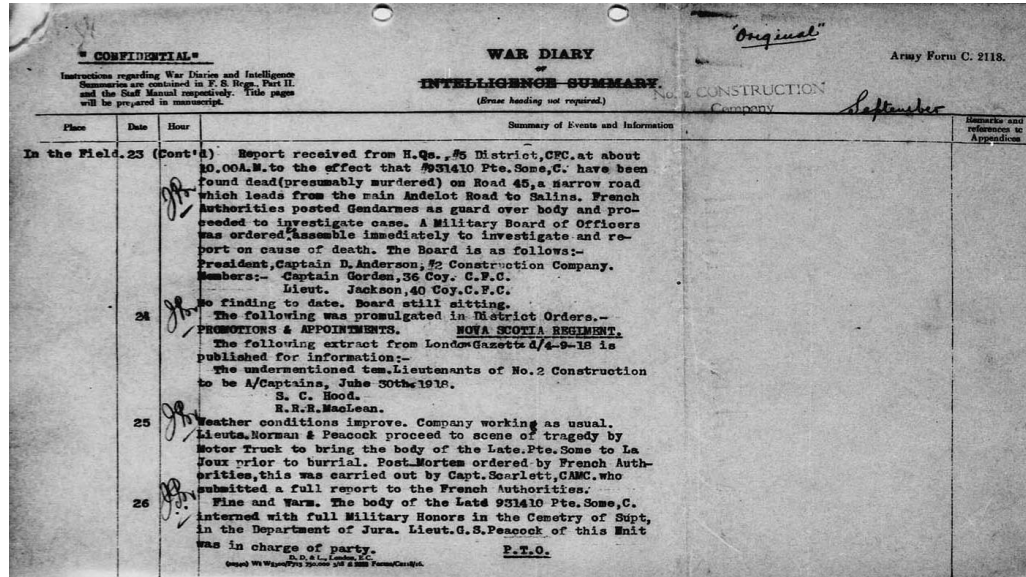


Figure 5: War Diary, No. 2 Construction Company, RG 9, III-D-3, Vol. 5015, Library and Archives Canada



Figure 6 : Logging Road, La Joux. Archives départementales du Jura, 7 Fi 1797.



Figure 7 : Charles Some's grave in Supt. Photo: Evelyne Guillaume, Archives départementales du Jura.

The man suspected of murdering Private Charles Some was a French soldier from Algeria, Touhami Ben Mohammed Burkat. French authorities suspected Burkat of Some's murder because he was absent from his detachment (which was quartered nearby in the village of Supt) at the time of Charlie Some's death. Burkat was tried by a French military court and sentenced to five years hard labour on January 7, 1919.<sup>8</sup>

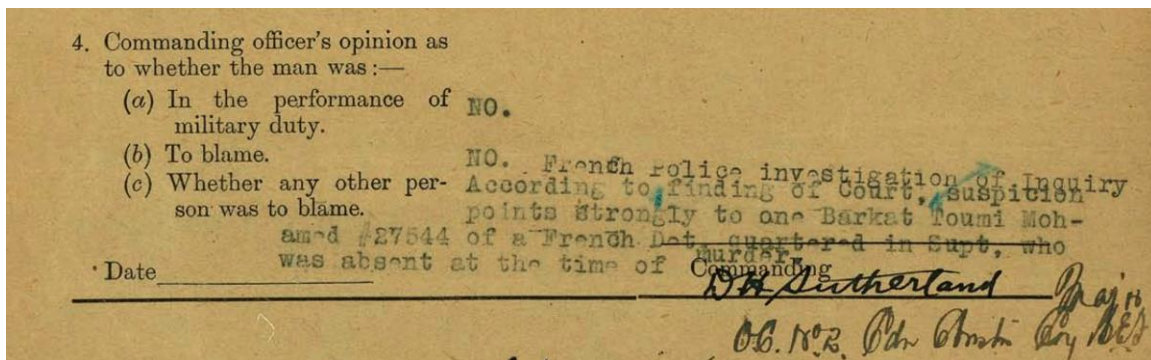


Figure 8: Service File, Charles Some #931410. RG 150 Box 9149-40, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>8</sup> Correspondence, No. 5 District, Canadian Forestry Corps to Jura Group, February 12, 1919. RG 9 III C 8 vol. 4516 file 11, Library and Archives Canada.



## Themes

Charlie Some's experience of the First World War raises a number of issues that are worth examining and contextualizing: the circumstances of his migration from Natal to Nova Scotia, his recruitment as a Black man into the military, his health and hospitalization, the labour he performed, and his non-compliance with the regulations and routines of military life. In each of these areas, the influence of racism and imperial anxieties are evident. Charlie's war experience is also significant because it illustrates the connections that existed between policies and practices at the local, national, imperial, and international levels. Finally, the geography of Charlie's story throws into sharp relief the extent to which the First World War was a truly global event, not simply because of its unprecedented scope, or the fact that battles were fought on several continents, but because it was a war that saw people from every corner of the world recruited into armies that transcended the nation-state, and then deployed to overseas battlefields where they served alongside soldiers of many nationalities and ethnicities.



Map 1: Charlie Some's Atlantic. Map: Colin Walker



## Migration

We do not know when Charlie Some arrived in Canada. There is no record of his entry at any Canadian port or border crossing, and no mention of him in census or Halifax municipal records from the period. There is good reason to believe, however, that Charlie Some came to Nova Scotia around 1913/1914, a year of peak immigration to Canada through Halifax.<sup>9</sup>

The first clue comes, strangely enough, from the lack of evidence of his immigration. On August 12, 1911 a Canadian Order-in-council blocked the immigration of Black people to Canada. Although this policy never became law, it was implemented with vigor, and tremendous obstacles were put in the way of Black migrants hoping to start a new life in Canada. The result was that people of African descent intending to settle in Canada were forced to enter the country illegally. This puts the broad timeline for Charlie Some's entry into Canada between late 1911 and late 1914, by which time the war had made transatlantic travel especially difficult.

Another factor that makes it likely that Charlie Some came to Canada in 1913/1914 is the political and racial climate in South Africa, where he was born. In 1910, the Union of South Africa brought together the former British colonies of Natal, the Cape, Transvaal, and Orange Free State. The South African government wasted little time in implementing racial policies designed at marginalizing and dispossessing its Black population.<sup>10</sup> In 1913, the South African government passed the *Natives Land Act*, a law that evicted Black farmers from their land and forced them either into barely habitable "reserves" or into labour for white South Africans: it was "designed to entrench white power and property rights in the countryside as well as to solve the 'native problem' of African peasant farmers working for themselves and denying their labour power to white employers."<sup>11</sup>

The influence of the *Natives Land Act* on Black South Africans is difficult to overstate. As Sol T. Plaatje, a keen observer of the effects of the legislation, wrote: "Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth ... people were driven from home, homes broken up, with no hopes of redress. ... Under severe pains and penalties, Black South Africans were deprived of the bare human right of living on the land, except as servants in the employ of whites."<sup>12</sup> The act gave white farmers the power to make serfs of their tenants and appropriate their livestock. Many Black South Africans chose, as a result, to leave their farms rather than hand their landlords all their assets. This choice made them homeless fugitives.

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<sup>9</sup> D. Owen Carrigan, "The Immigrant Experience in Halifax, 1881-1931" *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 20 no. 3, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> See Iris Berger, *South Africa in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and Albert Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War* (Raven, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa - Before and Since* (1914).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

In Natal, a number of other factors made life yet more difficult for a man like Charlie Some. The discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1890s had, by the 1910s, led to the development of huge mines where men were confined and worked in prison-like conditions.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, a poll tax on unmarried Black men had been introduced in 1905 to pressure them into this particular labour market.<sup>14</sup> The situation in South Africa was the culmination of decades of concerted effort on the part of the colonists to turn Black farmers and warriors into repressed and exploited wage labourers, and likely explains why Charlie Some boarded a ship in Durban that would lead him to Halifax.<sup>15</sup> These factors also help explain why, upon his enlistment in the Canadian Army, Charlie Some described himself as a labourer.

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<sup>13</sup> Berger, *South Africa in World History* and Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War*.

<sup>14</sup> Berger, *South Africa in World History*.

<sup>15</sup> Since it is unlikely that Charlie Some could afford passage across the Atlantic, he probably worked on a ship, or a series of ships, that would ultimately bring him to Nova Scotia.

DUPLICATE

ATTESTATION PAPER.

No. 931410

No. 2 CONSTRUCTION Bn. C.E.F. CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

Folio.

QUESTIONS TO BE PUT BEFORE ATTESTATION.

(ANSWERS.)

- What is your surname?..... *Some*
- 1a. What are your Christian names?..... *Charles*
- 1b. What is your present address?..... *Africville Halifax N.S.*
- 2. In what Town, Township or Parish, and in what Country were you born?..... *Pratale Africa*
- 3. What is the name of your next-of-kin?..... *Mrs Charles Some*
- 4. What is the address of your next-of-kin?..... *Africville Halifax N.S.*
- 5. What is the relationship of your next-of-kin?..... *Wife*
- 6. What is the date of your birth?..... *1886*
- 7. What is your Trade or Calling?..... *labours*
- 8. Are you married?..... *yes*
- 9. Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated and inoculated?..... *yes*
- 10. Do you now belong to the Active Militia?..... *no*
- 11. Have you ever served in any Military Force?..... *no*  
If so, state particulars of former Service.
- 12. Do you understand the nature and terms of your engagement?..... *yes*
- 13. Are you willing to be attested to serve in the } CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE? } *yes*

DECLARATION TO BE MADE BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, *Chas Some*, do solemnly declare that the above are answers made by me to the above questions and that they are true, and that I am willing to fulfil the engagements by me now made, and I hereby engage and agree to serve in the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force, and to be attached to any arm of the service therein, for the term of one year, or during the war now existing between Great Britain and Germany should that war last longer than one year, and for six months after the termination of that war provided His Majesty should so long require my services, or until legally discharged.

*Charles Chas Some* (Signature of Recruit)

Date *January 13 1917* *C.S.M. W.A. DeLesta* (Signature of Witness)

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, *Chas Some*, do make Oath, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, and that I will as duty bound honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of all the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God.

*Charles Chas Some* (Signature of Recruit)

Date *January 13 1917* *C.S.M. W.A. DeLesta* (Signature of Witness)

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE.

The Recruit above-named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the above questions he would be liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act. The above questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence.

I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to, and the said Recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken the oath before me, at *Halifax* this *13* day of *Jan* 1917.

*W.A. DeLesta* (Signature of Justice)

M. F. W. 22. 600M-2-18. H. Q. 1772-39-94L.

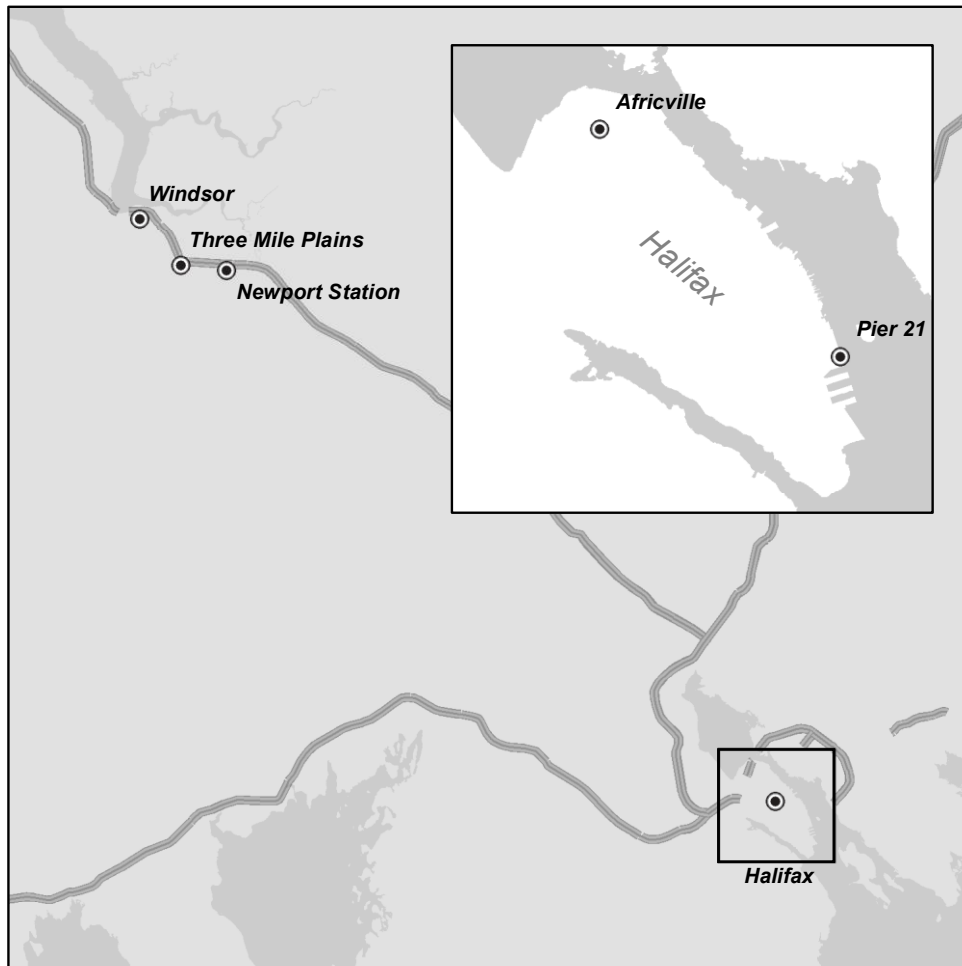
A Justice of the peace in and for the City & County of Halifax, N. S.

Figure 10: Service File, Charles Some #931410. RG 150 Box 9149-40, Library and Archives Canada.



## Recruitment

Charlie Some enlisted in the No. 2 Construction Battalion in January 1917. When he joined, he was married and living in Africville. His “English” wife Gertrude was born in Mapleton (Three Mile Plains), Nova Scotia around 1892. We don’t know how Gertrude and Charlie met, though there were long-standing links between the Black communities in Africville and the Windsor area.<sup>16</sup> Seafaring was major source of employment for men in both communities, and probably for Charlie Some as well. Men from Africville also sought work at the gypsum quarry in Three Mile Plains, an industry with which Charlie Some was likely well acquainted given his early life in Natal, where the Black population was overwhelmingly employed in mining. The Windsor Plains United Baptist Church, also in Three Mile Plains, is another possible site of encounter: Charlie Some described himself as Baptist in his service file. Whatever the circumstances of their meeting and marriage, Charlie and Gertrude Some’s interracial relationship was unconventional, and both would have been outsiders in the community where they settled.<sup>17</sup>



Map 2: Charlie Some's Nova Scotia. Map: Colin Walker

<sup>16</sup> See David W. States, “Presence and Perseverance: Blacks in Hants County Nova Scotia, 1871-1914” (MA thesis, Saint Mary's University, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Gertrude Some moved back to Newport Station/Three Mile Plains when Charlie enlisted.

When Charlie Some enlisted in the No. 2 Construction Battalion in January 1917, he joined a unit that was understrength and desperately trying to recruit additional men to meet promises made to the Canadian military, and to prove the loyalty and capability of African-Canadian manhood. Charlie Some's attestation was witnessed by Wilfred A. DeCosta, a Black community leader, founding editor of the *Atlantic Advocate*, erstwhile collections agent and, by January 1917, a recruiter for the No. 2.<sup>18</sup> Many elites within the Black community in Nova Scotia supported the creation of the No. 2 and the enlistment and service of their community members in its ranks. The crisis came, however, as a result of a reluctance to join within the broader Black community. African-Canadians who had come forward to volunteer in 1914 had been turned away, told that this was a "white man's war" and that their contributions were not wanted.<sup>19</sup> As the casualties mounted, as recruitment declined, and as the government considered conscription, the CEF finally consented to the creation of the No. 2 in July 1916, but with the provision that its members be restricted to manual labour and not deployed to the front lines. It is not surprising, then, that many African-Canadian men were disinclined to join an army that did not want or value their service. We do not know what motivated Charlie Some to enlist, but given the late date of his attestation, his recent arrival in Canada, and the precariousness of the labour market and of life in Africville, it is likely that Charlie Some joined the army because it was a job. His enlistment would have provided income for him and separation pay for his wife, revenue that was as much if not more money than either of them were likely to earn in Halifax or Hants County.

When we broaden our lens to look at recruitment in the rest of the colonial world, we see similar trends in South Africa and elsewhere in the British Empire, but also in the French Empire.<sup>20</sup> The pattern of an initial rejection of Black soldiers, enthusiasm for war on the part of Black elites who saw military service as an avenue for political and social emancipation, followed by a crisis generated by high casualty rates and recruitment difficulties which led to the belated mobilization (and tepid response) of Black soldiers who then served under highly restricted circumstances, was repeated all over the world. Like in Canada, the peak of those recruitment efforts came in 1916/1917. Ultimately, one million Black soldiers served in France. The conditions of Black soldiers' service varied according to where they were from, what army they served in, and when, but racist attitudes are evident throughout. What is striking, however, is the malleability of those attitudes, which can be seen most clearly in the contrast between British and French approaches to the mobilization of colonial soldiers.

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<sup>18</sup> See Sean Flynn Foyn, "The Underside of Glory: AfriCanadian Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917" (MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 1999), p. 87.

<sup>19</sup> See Calvin W. Ruck, *The Black Battalion, 1916-1920. Canada's Best Kept Military Secret* (Nimbus, 1987) and James W. St.G. Walker, "Race and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force" *Canadian Historical Review* vol. 70, no. 1, March 1989, pp. 1-26.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Philip Morgan and Sean Hawkins, *Black Experience and the Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2004), Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (eds.), *Empires at War, 1911-1923* (Oxford University Press, 2014), Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (eds.), *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Duke University Press, 2003).

The British army mobilized colonial troops from all over the British Empire. Some colonial soldiers, like the Nepalese Gurkhas, whom the British considered to be a “martial race”, were permitted to bear arms in non-European theaters of the war. The British West India Regiment fought in Egypt and Palestine but in Europe they were kept segregated and restricted to labour duties. The racist understanding of the character and abilities of Black men, who were considered to be infantile but also hyper-sexualized, barbaric but also lazy and unreliable, precluded their service at the front. Such perceptions were reinforced by the South African General Smuts who arrived in England in January 1917 and was an influential opponent of the presence of Black Africans on European battlefields.<sup>21</sup> The British restricted the movement and activities of Black colonial soldiers but also consented that, when properly led, they could be a valuable source of labour as long as they were segregated and contained.

The French, following the lead of General Mangin, took a different approach. Mangin had long argued that the French Empire was a vast reservoir of potential recruits for the French army.<sup>22</sup> Like the British, the French classified various ethnic groups as “martial” or not, but unlike the British army, Mangin and the French Command argued that Black soldiers should fight -- not least because their “warlike instincts” and “underdeveloped nervous systems” would make them less sensitive to the horrors of modern warfare. As a result of Mangin’s advocacy, French colonial soldiers not only served in the French army but fought on the Western Front. When African-American soldiers of the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment arrived in France in 1918, they fought in the French army as well, though the majority of African-American soldiers, like African-Canadians, were relegated to service units.<sup>23</sup> Many French colonial soldiers also served in labour battalions, including Charlie Some’s alleged murderer Touhami Ben Mohammed Burkat.

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<sup>21</sup> See Dick van Galen Last with Ralf Futselaar, *Black Shame: African Soldiers in Europe, 1914-1922* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> See Fogarty, *Race and War in France*, Joe H. Lunn, “‘Bons soldats’ and ‘sales nègres’: Changing French Perceptions of West African Soldiers during the First World War” *French Colonial History*, vol. 1, 2002, pp. 1-16 and “‘Les Races guerrières’: Racial preconceptions in the French military about West African soldiers during the First World War” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1999, pp.517-36.

<sup>23</sup> See Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African-Americans and World War I* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

## Health

Charlie Some was hospitalized twice during his service in the Canadian Expeditionary Force: once, for syphilis, at the Canadian Hospital at Etchinghill, and once for a head wound sustained when he was hit “by a man with a piece of iron” while he was stationed at the Canadian base at Bramshott.



Map 3: Charlie Some's England. Map: Colin Walker

The Canadian Hospital at Etchinghill was established specifically for the treatment of venereal diseases. At Etchinghill, Charlie Some received a full course of treatment, which consisted of injections of compound 606 (arsphenamine) between May 18 and July 16, 1917. At the end of his treatment, Some nevertheless still tested positive for syphilis. A positive result on the Wassermann test (a blood test widely used to diagnose syphilis) could mean that Charlie Some was still infected, and his syphilis was sufficiently advanced to be resistant to treatment. On the other hand, false positives sometimes occurred due to malaria or tuberculosis. Given Charlie Some's early life in Natal, it is conceivable that he had malaria: 40% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is believed to have been infected with the disease in the period between 1900 and 1929.<sup>24</sup> It is likewise possible

<sup>24</sup> "Historical data chart: malaria's decline" *Nature: International Journal of Science* (2017), 11 October 2017.

that Charlie Some had tuberculosis. The community of Africville suffered consistently high tuberculosis rates, and Gertrude Some died of pulmonary tuberculosis in 1920.<sup>25</sup>

Canadian soldiers had the highest rates of venereal disease of all troops serving in Europe in the First World War.<sup>26</sup> By the end of the conflict, 18,612 CEF soldiers had been diagnosed with syphilis -- a rate six times higher than British troops. The Canadian military and Canadian politicians blamed British women for this epidemic, and Prime Minister Borden -- in London in 1917 for the Imperial War Conference -- demanded that British authorities enact measures to protect soldiers from infection.<sup>27</sup> The controversial Regulation 40D under the *Defense of the Realm Act* (DORA) made British women responsible for the spread of venereal disease, and subjected them to curfews, detention and physical examination.<sup>28</sup> Charlie Some, however, contracted his syphilis in Halifax. By the time he was hospitalized in May 1917, his symptoms indicated that the disease had entered its secondary stage, which suggests that he contracted it between the time of his enlistment in January 1917 (when he received a clean bill of health) and when he shipped out of Halifax at the end of March.

**SYPHILIS CASE-SHEET.**

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Regtl. No. <del>512518</del> <sup>45010</sup> | Rank and Name <i>Some Pte G</i>   | Corps <i>2<sup>nd</sup> Construction Bn</i> |
| CANADIAN HOSPITAL,                            |   |   |
| Placed on Syphilis Register at                | ETCHINGHILL, LYMINGE.   | on <i>18-5-17</i> No. in Register           |
| Disease contracted at                         | <i>Halifax</i>  | Primary sore appeared on (date)             |
| CONDITION WHEN PLACED ON REGISTER.            |   |   |
| Primary sore—character and site               | <i>Healed scars on penis</i>  |   |
| Lymphatic glands                              | <i>Inguinal glands + axillary &amp; cervical palpable</i>   |   |
| Skin (nature and distribution of rash)        | <i>Negative</i>   |   |
| Mucous membranes                              | <i>Mucous patches on tongue &amp; left tonsils, in cheeks</i>                                     |   |
| Other symptoms                                | <i>pale</i><br><i>Multiple warts on penis, condylomata about anus</i><br><i>Rhombosa. marked.</i> |   |

Figure 11: Service File, Charles Some #931410. RG 150 Box 9149-40, Library and Archives Canada.

Although Charlie Some appears not to have been infected when he joined up, a syphilis diagnosis would not have prevented his enlistment. From late 1915 onward, men infected with syphilis were permitted to enlist, given the recruitment crisis and the tremendous

<sup>25</sup> Death Certificate, Gertrude Some. Nova Scotia Historical Vital Statistics, Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

<sup>26</sup> See Sarah Cozzi, "When You're a Long, Long Way from Home: The Establishment of Canadian Only Social Clubs for CEF Soldiers in London, 1915-1919" *Canadian Military History* vol. 20 no. 1, 2012 and Jay Cassel, *The Secret Plague: Venereal Disease in Canada, 1838-1939* (University of Toronto Press, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> Philippa Levine, "Battle Colors: Race, Sex and Colonial Soldierly in World War I" *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 9 no. 2, winter 1998, p. 118.

<sup>28</sup> See Grayzel, "The Enemy Within: The Problem of British Women's Sexuality During the First World War" in Nicole A. Dombrowski (ed); *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted with or without Consent* (Routledge, 2004).

casualty rates at the front.<sup>29</sup> Once in the military, however, infection with a venereal disease was considered a “self-inflicted wound”: this was intended not only to stigmatize the infection and the behaviour that led to it, but it also made infected soldiers ineligible for wages during their treatment. Their pay was withheld for the duration of their treatment both as punishment and to prevent re-infection (the logic being that soldiers would spend their earnings on alcohol and sex). Despite this, discipline appeared difficult to maintain even in the venereal wards at Etchinghill. As one hospital official reported: “troops are in the habit of going to [the village] and the outlying public houses where they endeavor to obtain liquor out of hours and more than is good for them ... the patients at the hospital get out over the wall...”<sup>30</sup>

Charlie Some was discharged from Etchinghill hospital on June 19, but continued treatment for another month. By 1917 the demands of the war effort meant that soldiers were often discharged and put to work before they were cured, and continued treatment while working. It is possible, however, that prejudice may have also played a part in his early discharge. In October 1917, a complaint was lodged regarding thirty-five “Chinamen” who were being treated for venereal diseases at Etchinghill. According to a CEF official, “our men are very indignant at having to stay in a hospital with these aliens, as their habits are filthy... .” The hospital administration was asked to report “just how much the members of the CEF come in contact with these Asiatics, [and] also outline what steps are taken to keep these two classes of patients separated both in their living quarters and also in their messing and latrine accommodations.”<sup>31</sup> The Chinese troops were promptly removed from the hospital, and it is likewise possible that Charlie Some was discharged early due to similarly racist concerns.

Charlie Some was transferred to the 17<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion at Bramshott on October 15, 1917. Bramshott was one of the largest Canadian bases in the UK, and included regimental depots, a “tin town” of shops and cafés, and the No. 12 Canadian General Hospital where Charlie Some was treated following his assault on November 28, 1917. Some stated that he was “hit over the head by a man with a piece of iron.” Although no other details of this encounter were recorded and there was no investigation into the attack, there are accounts of men returning at night from the nearby village of Haslemere being “sandbagged” (hit over the head with something heavy and mugged). Canadian soldiers were comparatively well paid, making them the object of resentment among British troops and civilians alike. This, and the Canadians’ reputation for carousing with British women, strained relations with surrounding communities.<sup>32</sup> To make relations tenser still, there was significant hostility towards soldiers in labour and reserve battalions because they were not serving at the front lines.

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<sup>29</sup> See Nic Clarke, *Unwanted Warriors: Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016 and Ann D. Herring, *Damage Control: The Untold Story of Venereal Disease in Hamilton, 1900-1950* (2014).

<sup>30</sup> Correspondence, Canadian Hospital Etchinghill, Dec. 30 1917. RG III 661 D 982, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>31</sup> Correspondence, Canadian Hospital Etchinghill, Oct. 10 1917. RG III 661 D 982, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>32</sup> See Levine, “Battle colours.”

Managing interactions between troops and their host communities was of great concern to military and civilian authorities, especially when those soldiers were Black. Racist views were common in all segments of British society and had become even more sharply defined because of the war and the presence of colonial troops on British soil.<sup>33</sup> The logic of empire demanded that colonial troops be restricted and sequestered so that contact between Black soldiers and white troops and civilians was kept to a minimum. Imperial authorities feared that if Black men became accustomed to circulating freely in the mother country and interacting as equals with the British people, they might demand the same rights in the colonies once they returned home.

Charlie Some, as a member of the Canadian army, was not technically a “colonial” soldier, but the reality of his position in England would have been ambiguous. Within the system of empire, distinctions between colony and dominion were racial as well as administrative. Black Canadian soldiers straddled that line. They were citizens of a dominion, rather than colonial subjects, but their race relegated them to treatment similar to colonized peoples. As a Canadian soldier in England, Charlie Some would have had a degree of mobility that a South African or other colonial soldier would not. But racist and imperial anxieties demanded that Black men in uniform be restricted and constrained. This “inconsistency” was responsible for the speedy deployment of the No. 2 to the forests of France, and also for their rapid demobilization and return to Canada at the end of the war.<sup>34</sup>

Such ambiguity was heightened in Charlie Some’s case because he remained behind in England when the rest of the No. 2 deployed to France and because, in one crucial way, Charlie Some represented exactly the kind of mobility that imperialists feared -- he had traversed the boundaries of colonial subjecthood. In South Africa, Charlie Some was not a citizen, but a subject. Black South Africans were subjects of the Crown and of the South African government, which denied them citizenship. In Canada, Charlie Some was not a citizen either -- the circumstances of his arrival in Canada had prevented his official immigration. From the Imperial perspective, Charlie Some was a colonial soldier in British uniform, a transgression that was deemed deeply threatening.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Jacqueline Jenkinson, “All in the Same Uniform? The Participation of Black Colonial Residents in the British Armed Forces in the First World War” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 40 no. 2, June 2012, pp. 207-230.

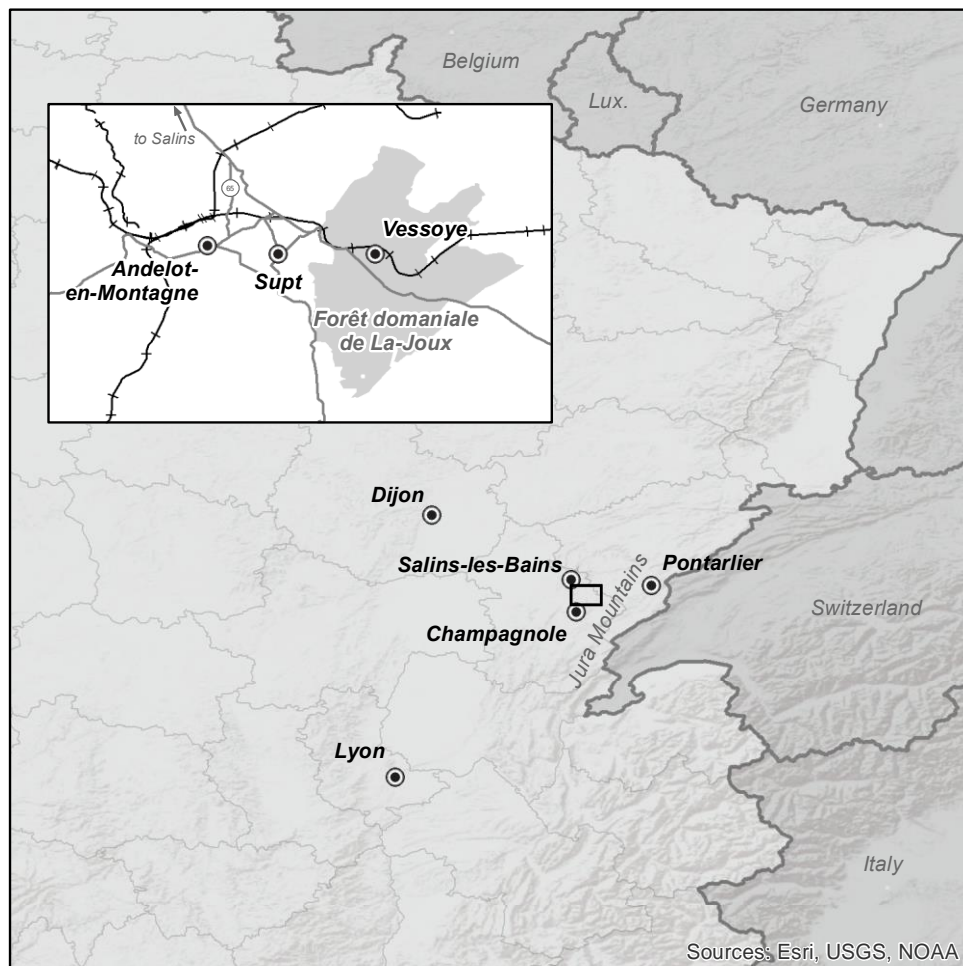
<sup>34</sup> See John G. Armstrong, “The Unwelcome Sacrifice: A Black Unit in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1917-1919” in N.F. Dreisziger (ed), *Ethnic Armies: Polyethnic Armed Forces from the time of the Hapsburgs to the Age of the Superpowers* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> South African Native Labour Contingent (SNLC) uniforms, in contrast, were deliberately flimsy and ill-fitting, in order to reinforce the soldiers’ inferior position. See Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War*.



## Non-compliance

Charlie Some's indiscipline began in Canada, a month after his enlistment. In February 1917, he forfeited two days pay for being drunk, and in March he went Absent Without Leave, and so forfeited a week's pay and was confined to his barracks. Once he arrived in France at the end of May 1918, Charlie went absent several times. On June 5, he left his party without permission. For this he was given 10 days Field Punishment No. 2, which involved close confinement or heavy exercise while wearing his full kit. Some went absent again between June 30 and July 3. He was arrested at a train station in Lyon -- 150 kilometers from the CFC camp -- and was sentenced to 28 days Field Punishment No. 1 (being tied to a post or wagon for up to two hours a day, plus close confinement and heavy exercise), as well as forfeiting four days' pay for his absence and for "telling a falsehood to Military Police." He went AWL again between August 25 and 27: he forfeited 2 days pay and received 12 days of Field Punishment No. 1.



Map 4: Charlie Some's France. Map: Colin Walker

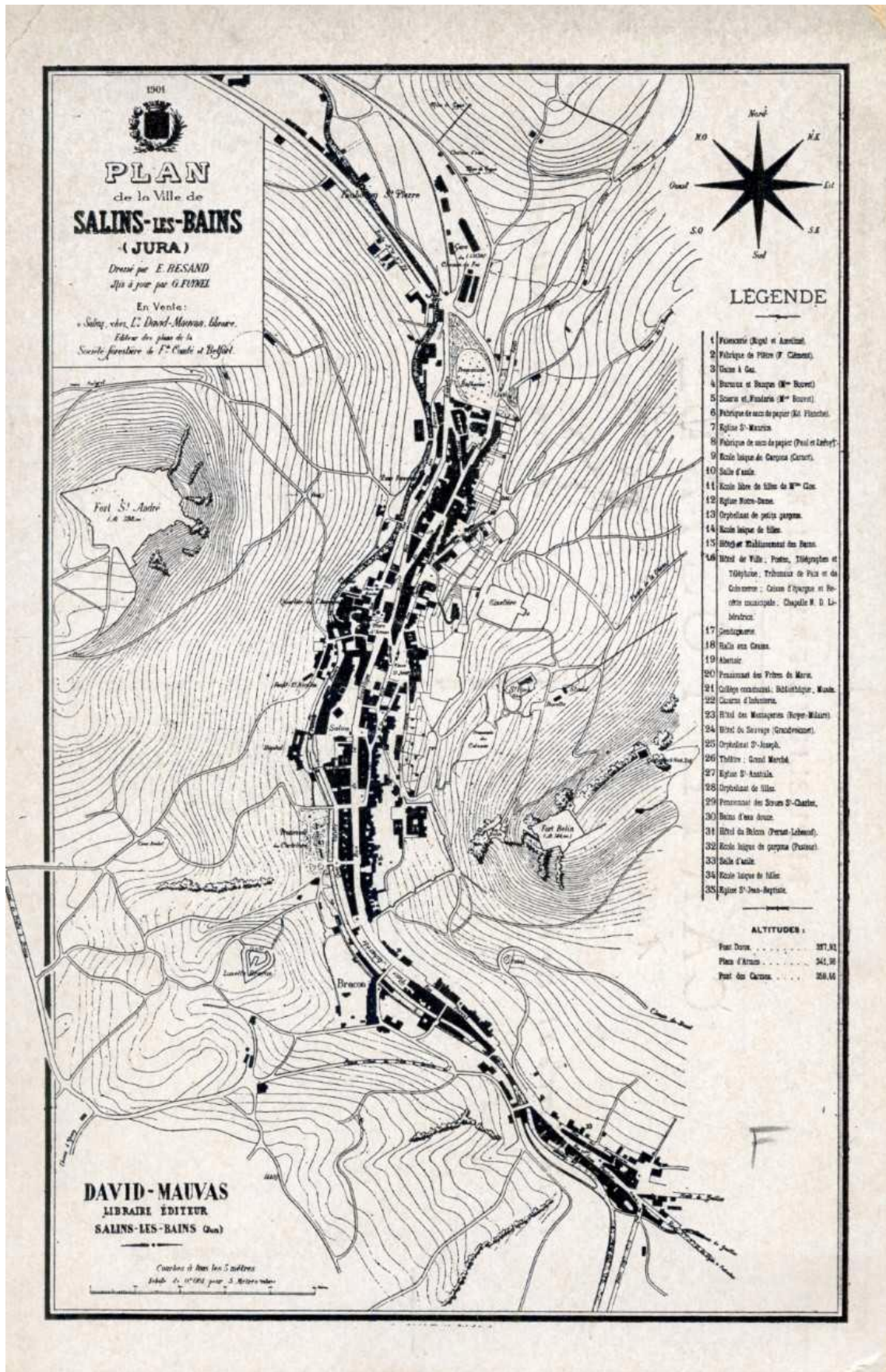
A number of factors are helpful in putting these absences in context. Both June 30 and August 25 were Sundays. In his diaries, Captain William White, the Chaplain for the No. 2 Construction Company, described June 30, 1918 as a “beautiful day” and August 25 as “clear after rain.”<sup>36</sup> Soldiers in the No. 2 Construction Company received very little leisure time: they were permitted only Sunday afternoons off, and, occasionally, passes were granted to the nearby villages of Champagnole, Andelot, Pontarlier or Salins. Champagnole was noted among the soldiers for its prostitutes, and Salins for cafés that stayed open late and served alcohol. That the soldiers availed themselves of these entertainments is clear: Captain White noted “soldier trouble” in Pontarlier, and when some of the men were granted leave further afield in early 1917, a dozen came back with venereal diseases. All further leave for the soldiers in the No. 2 was confined to Sunday afternoons. When leave passes were granted on Sundays, soldiers were expected to return to their barracks by 9:30 pm. Charlie Some was recorded as AWL at 9:30 pm both of the times he was absent, suggesting that he did not return to camp. This was a relatively common occurrence: soldiers would frequently stay out past curfew and NCOs were often sent to the surrounding villages to find men and escort them back.

Not only was the day of Charlie Some’s first absence “fine and warm,” it fell on the eve of Dominion Day (July 1) -- a holiday celebrated with sporting competitions, a parade, and a performance by the No. 2 Construction Company band. This break in routine may have made it easier for Some to slip away unnoticed and travel the 150 km to Lyon. The weekend of August 25 was likewise described as “fine and warm” and the soldiers spent the day playing piquet (a card game). Passes were also issued for Champagnole. The pattern of Charlie Some’s absences continued on the day before he died: on Sunday September 22, the No. 2 War Diary notes “piquet, passes issued for Champagnole, ... our band played all day at the Canadian Hospital for the benefit of the patients.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Diaries of Reverend William A. White, collection of the Black Cultural Centre, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

<sup>37</sup> War Diary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Construction Company (Coloured), Sept. 22, 1918. RG 9 III D 3 vol. 55015.



Map 5 : Map of Salins. Archives départementales du Jura, 7 Fi 1134.



## The Death of Sydney David

The death of another soldier in the No. 2 Construction Company, Private Sydney David (#931411), may also shed some light on Charlie Some's experience. Like Some, David had a "habit of going absent." In July 1917 he was found "drunk out of bounds" and violently resisted his escort back to camp. In August 1917, he was found in Salins without a pass. In January 1918, he was arrested in La Frasné without a pass, and was charged with creating a disturbance, damaging French government property, and drunkenness. He was AWL again in April that year.<sup>38</sup> Like Charlie Some, all of Sydney David's absences were on Sundays, and furthermore each was the last Sunday of the month. Like Some, David was AWL the night he died, however in his case we are better able to reconstruct the events in the hours preceding his death. Pte. David's brother-in-law, Pte. Jones, testified:

On Sunday afternoon, October 27, 1918, Private David and I went for a walk in the direction of Boujeailles. We went into a farmhouse about 4 km from La Joux [at Vessoie] where there were about ten or twelve Russian soldiers. We entered and had a few drinks. Shortly after 9:00 I said that we had better start for our quarters, but he would not come with me. ... Knowing that he was in the habit of being absent I did not think much of his not returning to camp.<sup>39</sup>

Pte. David was reported absent from his hut at 9:30 on Sunday, October 27, and every day following until his body was found by his friends, Ptes. Wallace, Madison, and Webster, on Sunday, November 10, 1918, at the bottom of a cliff 20-minutes walk from the farmhouse, face down at the foot of a large tree. From the position of the body, the search party judged that David had fallen over the edge of the cliff. The men reported their discovery to Captain White, who then inspected the body and helped carry it back to camp. An autopsy and investigation concluded that Private David, drunk and disoriented, lost his way back to camp and fell from a height of about 70 feet.

Two aspects of the story of Sydney David's death are worth highlighting: the presence of Russian soldiers, and the availability of alcohol in civilian homes. The CFC camp and the area surrounding it housed soldiers of many nationalities. There were French soldiers, Americans, Chinese, Moroccans, and Algerians all in the immediate vicinity of La Joux, and the Russian soldiers were in the Canadian camp itself. Sydney David's story also illustrates that alcohol was available not only in cafés and bars in the local villages but also in private homes, which became makeshift after-hours cafés for enlisted men. Witness testimony in the murder of another Canadian soldier in Jura, Lance Corporal Jean-Baptiste Daigle, provides a further example of these types of encounters. Before attempting to break into a woman's bedroom, and subsequently being shot and killed by a French civilian, Daigle had spent the evening drinking with other soldiers in the home of the Mayor of Montmorlot.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Service File, Sydney David, #931411. Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>39</sup> Testimony of Pte. W. Jones, Court of Inquiry, Dec. 16 1918. Service File, Sydney David, #931411. Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>40</sup> Service File, Jean-Baptiste Daigle, #666043. Library and Archives Canada.

These Sunday excursions, which for certain soldiers meant a search for alcohol and female companionship, led men out of camp and put them in contact with French civilians and soldiers of other nationalities. For many of the soldiers in the No. 2 these were brief moments of freedom and leisure, but for Sydney David and Charlie Some these encounters were fatal.

## Labour

While at La Joux, soldiers in the Canadian Forestry Corps, which included the No. 2 Construction Company, worked logging and milling timber. The war had created an insatiable appetite for wood, and the CFC's job was to meet the tremendous demand for lumber in the trenches of the Western Front. For all soldiers this meant long hours of heavy work, sometimes in unpleasant conditions. One member of the No. 2 noted: "At times [the work] was pretty good, at other times it was pretty bad and pretty lonely."<sup>41</sup> Soldiers in the No. 2 worked side-by-side with white units, but were segregated in their messes and barracks, hospital rooms and punishment compound. Certain accounts paint an optimistic image of racial relations among soldiers in the camp at La Joux,<sup>42</sup> though Captain White's diaries contain a number of observations of racism and hostility toward the soldiers of the No. 2. Racial violence also broke out among Canadian troops at Kinmel Park (UK) after the war.<sup>43</sup>

Hostility between the Canadians and the French likewise tends to be downplayed in discussions of the war effort. French documents are generally reticent about the African-Canadians in the CFC but do suggest that the tenor of interactions between Black soldiers and French communities was mixed at best. On one end of the spectrum, two soldiers from the No. 2 were charged with raping a French woman,<sup>44</sup> and in November 1917 fifty "troublemakers" were sent away from the camp in the hopes of improving relations with the locals.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, French civilians routinely came into camp selling souvenirs and other wares, and there were rumors that at least one romance between a French woman and a soldier from the No. 2 led to a pregnancy and perhaps even a foiled elopement.<sup>46</sup> Certain veterans of the No. 2 described being treated with respect by French civilians, while others recalled encountering prejudice. The general assumption about the soldiers in the No. 2 that is expressed in French accounts, however, is that they were criminals relegated to manual labour because they were not fit to fight.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Calvin W. Ruck, *The Black Battalion, 1916-1920. Canada's Best Kept Military Secret* (Nimbus, 1987), 57.

<sup>42</sup> See Danielle Pittman, "Moving Mountains: The No. 2 Construction Battalion and African Canadian Experience during the First World War" (MA thesis, Mount Saint Vincent University, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> See Walker, "Race and Recruitment."

<sup>44</sup> Correspondence, No. 5 District, Canadian Forestry Corps RG 9 III C 8 vol. 4515 file 8, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>45</sup> See Armstrong, "The Unwelcome Sacrifice", 197.

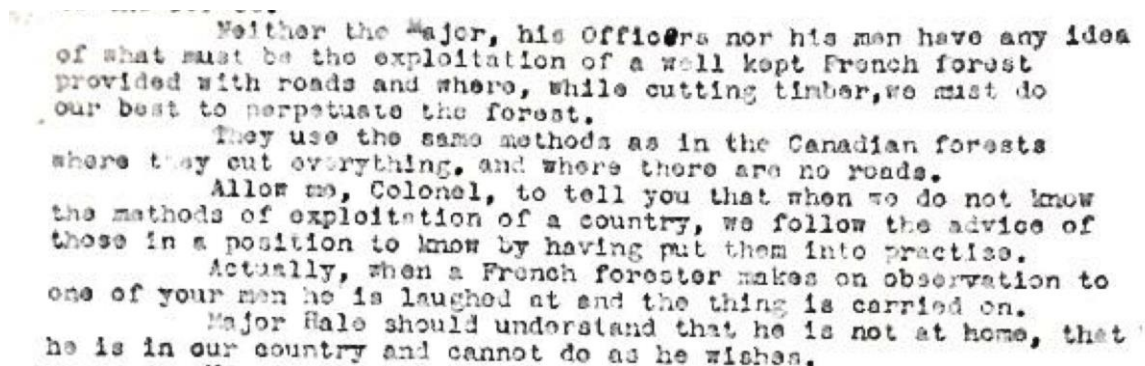
<sup>46</sup> Per Evelyne Guillaume, Archives départementales du Jura.

<sup>47</sup> See *Histoire des Canadiens de la Joux et des Américains du Ronde en Forêt de Levier*, Archives départementales du Jura, Bn 4579 and Pierre Barthet, "Les Canadiens en forêt domaniale de la Joux" (1990), Archives départementales du Jura.

Also significant is a broader conflict and deeper animosity between the French and Canadians over forestry practices. At the same time that Charlie Some arrived in the Jura, a controversy erupted over how the Canadians harvested wood and managed the forests in the region. In early 1918, the state forester for the Jura, M. Schlumberger, complained to the Canadian commander about the systematic devastation of the forest in the Jura and the fact that the Canadians “had no idea of how to harvest a well kept French forest.”<sup>48</sup> The CFC, the Frenchman protested, “use the same methods as in Canada, where they cut everything” and -- most seriously -- left very tall stumps resulting in a tremendous waste of wood.

The stumps over the entire area average 4-8 inches higher than those cut by the French. The breakage seems to be abnormally high ... a large number of pole-sized trees have been knocked down and are left lodged or lying on the ground, and a number have been broken off 10-30 feet high.<sup>49</sup>

The French complaint led to a series of inspections of the forest at La Joux, with a final verdict that “conditions in the forest [were] anything but satisfactory, and [were] leaving the No. 5 District open to heavy criticism.” “The height of the stumps,” a Canadian inspector confessed, “I was unable to defend or explain.”<sup>50</sup> The Canadian commander for Jura justified his soldiers’ methods by citing the urgent need for wood and the pressing demands of the war effort: “destruction and waste, in my experience, are inseparable from a state of war, and I would ask that you not blame these Canadians of mine too harshly for the present unsatisfactory conditions. ... The only criticism that could apply [is their] keen desire to meet the demands of the French Army.” Nevertheless, this controversy ended, as he suspected it would, “in a lot of recriminations and hard feelings.”<sup>51</sup> Seventy years later, French observers continued to decry the “souches canadiens” (“Canadian stumps”) and the soldiers who cut them: “our officials found it impossible to lay down the law to these barbarians.”<sup>52</sup>



Neither the Major, his Officers nor his men have any idea of what must be the exploitation of a well kept French forest provided with roads and where, while cutting timber, we must do our best to perpetuate the forest.

They use the same methods as in the Canadian forests where they cut everything, and where there are no roads.

Allow me, Colonel, to tell you that when we do not know the methods of exploitation of a country, we follow the advice of those in a position to know by having put them into practice.

Actually, when a French forester makes an observation to one of your men he is laughed at and the thing is carried on.

Major Hale should understand that he is not at home, that he is in our country and cannot do as he wishes.

Figure 12: M. Schlumberger to Lt. Col. Johnson, RG 9 III C 8 vol. 4517 file 43, Library and Archives Canada

<sup>48</sup> M. Schlumberger to Lt. Col. Johnson, nd. RG 9 III C 8 vol. 4517 file 43, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>49</sup> Report, Sgt H.O. Root, 14 July 1918. RG 9 III C 8 vol. 4517 file 43, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Lt. Col. Johnson to M. Schlumberger, April 15, 1918. RG 9 III C 8 vol. 4517 file 43, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>52</sup> *Histoire des Canadiens de la Joux et des Américains du Ronde en Forêt de Levier*, Archives départementales du Jura, Bn 4579.



In the context of Charlie's war, this tension between the French and the Canadians over forestry practices in 1917 and 1918 is significant for several reasons: the period from the spring of 1917 to the summer of 1918 was a low-point in French morale during the First World War. The same period also saw the peak of racial violence perpetrated against colonial soldiers in France, especially those employed as labourers.<sup>53</sup> This wave of racial violence must be placed alongside the crisis of wartime morale that enveloped France in 1917 and 1918 because, as historian Tyler Stovall has described, Black soldiers came to symbolize the war's harmful impact, especially for the French working class for whom colonial labourers became targets of violence in an extreme expression of more widely held prejudices. The idea that these soldiers were dangerous foreigners, prone to causing trouble for innocent French men and (especially) women, combined with fears that these same foreigners were threatening the communities' interests and future livelihood, led to an outbreak of assaults against Black soldiers across France. These attacks were most often unprovoked, and generally involved French soldiers stabbing and cutting the throats of their unwitting victims.

From the French perspective, the Canadians at La Joux threatened the future livelihood of the surrounding communities by destroying the forests. The Black soldiers in the CFC, because of their physical distinctiveness and because of the locals' existing prejudices, may well have become targets in the same way colonial labourers did in other French communities in the same period. In this context, Charlie Some's murder -- the fact that he was stabbed and had his throat cut, allegedly by a French soldier -- appears as part of a broader pattern of racial violence in France in the latter years of the First World War.

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<sup>53</sup> See Tyler Stovall, "The Color Line behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France during the Great War" *American Historical Review*, vol. 103, no. 3, June 1998, pp. 737-769.

## Race and Empire

Race and empire are crucially important themes in our understanding of “Charlie’s war.” Racial prejudice and imperial agendas were defining features of Charlie Some’s life in South Africa, his migration to Canada, his settlement in Africville, his enlistment in the No. 2 Construction Battalion, the circumstances of his deployment, and -- likely -- the violence he suffered. These two interconnected forces shaped his life and experience profoundly. They also shape the history of Great War and of the early twentieth century.

W.E.B. Du Bois famously traced the origins of the First World War to the 1884 Berlin Conference, which formalized the Scramble for Africa.<sup>54</sup> More recently, a growing number of historians of the First World War have also argued for a perspective of the conflict that shifts our thinking from seeing the Great War as a war of nation states to thinking about it as a war of empires. This shift in perspective allows us to see broader trends and patterns in how, why and when the various belligerents mobilized and deployed a wide variety of populations from all over the globe, and to understand how this mobilization and deployment shaped both the war itself and the people who experienced it. In so doing, we see the impact of global histories on local histories, and the web of connections between them.

In a similar way, race is critical to understanding empire, just as an imperial frame can contribute a great deal to studies of racism. Racism was fundamentally necessary to the structure and stability of imperial rule: the edifice of empire relied upon keeping the “subject races” of the colonies “in their place” -- politically, socially, economically and, also, geographically. Likewise, viewing racism in global terms highlights its contextual nature, but also illuminates the common experiences of people of African descent. As Charlie’s war testifies, Black experience was in many ways hybrid, fluid and ambiguous. But we also see the shared histories of marginalization, diaspora, and exploitation of labour that have shaped the lives of Black people and communities for centuries. These issues remind us that a story such as Charlie Some’s -- which on the surface appears perhaps as a counter-narrative to other Canadian soldiers’ stories of the First World War - is in fact remarkably representative of much broader trends.

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<sup>54</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The African Roots of War” *Atlantic Monthly*, 1915. <http://scua.library.umass.edu/digital/dubois/WarRoots.pdf>. Also quoted in Flynn Foyn, “The Underside of Glory”.

Description of *Charles Some* on Enlistment.

Apparent Age *30* years *-* months.  
 (To be determined according to the instructions given in the Regulations for Army Medical Services.)

Distinctive marks, and marks indicating congenital peculiarities or previous disease.  
 (Should the Medical Officer be of opinion that the recruit has served before, he will, unless the man acknowledges to any previous service, attach a slip to that effect, for the information of the Approving Officer).

Height ..... *5* ft. *6* ins.

*Nil*

Chest measurement { Girth when fully expanded ..... *36 1/2* ins.  
 Range of expansion ..... *3 1/2* ins.

Complexion ..... *Dark*

Eyes ..... *Brown*

Hair ..... *Black*

Religious denominations.  
 Church of England .....  
 Presbyterian .....  
 Methodist .....  
 Baptist or Congregationalist ..... *yes*  
 Roman Catholic .....  
 Jewish .....  
 Other denominations .....  
 (Denomination to be stated.)

*Weight 130 lbs.*

Figure 13: Service File, Charles Some #931410. RG 150 Box 9149-40, Library and Archives Canada.

## In Search of Charlie Some

The story of Charlie Some's life and death was reconstructed from a handful of documents, all but one of which were created by the Canadian military. The details of Charlie Some's life were gleaned from his service file, the War Diaries of the units with which he served (the No. 2 Construction Company, the 7<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalions) and files from the hospitals in which he was treated (the Canadian Hospitals at Etchinghill and Bramshott). The only other document pertaining to Charlie Some that we were able to locate is his wife Gertrude's death certificate.

| FORM 6   |  | PROVINCE OF NOVA SCOTIA   |  | CERTIFICATE OF REGISTRATION OF DEATH   |  | 181 ✓  |  |
|--|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| 1 PLACE OF DEATH—  |  |   |  | Registered No. _____   |  | (For use of Registrar General only)  |  |
| County of <i>fauld</i>   |  | Municipality of <i>West fauld</i>                               |  | City or Town <i>napleton</i>   |  | Street _____   |  |
| City or Town _____   |  | Street _____  |  | House No. _____  |  | House No. _____  |  |
| If in hospital or institution, give name <i>none</i>   |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2 NAME OF DECEASED <i>Gertrude Some</i>  |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |
| Residence <i>napleton</i>  |  |   |  | (Usual place of abode)   |  |  |  |
| PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL INFORMATION   |  |   |  | MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH   |  |  |  |
| 3 SEX <i>Female</i>  |  | 4 RACIAL ORIGIN <i>English</i>                                  |  | 5 Single, Married, Widowed or Divorced <i>Married</i>  |  | 20 Date of death <i>April 14</i> 19 <i>22</i>  |  |
| 6 BIRTHPLACE (Province or Country) <i>napleton NB</i>  |  | 7 DATE OF BIRTH (month, day and year) <i>Nov 4 1888</i>         |  | 8 AGE <i>28</i> Years _____ Months _____ Days _____  |  | 21 I HEREBY CERTIFY, that I attended deceased from _____ 19____ to <i>Apr 12</i> 19 <i>20</i> that I last saw her alive on <i>Apr 12</i> 19 <i>20</i> and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at _____ m. |  |
| 9 LAST OCCUPATION OF DECEASED  |  |   |  | The CAUSE OF DEATH was as follows:<br><i>Tub. Tbc</i>  |  |  |  |
| (a) _____ (Trade or occupation or kind of work)  |  |   |  | (duration) _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ dys   |  |  |  |
| (b) _____ (Kind of industry)   |  |   |  | CONTRIBUTORY (Secondary) _____ (duration) _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ dys  |  |  |  |
| (c) From _____ to _____ (Date from which to which an employer'd)   |  |   |  | 22 Where was disease contracted if not at place of death? _____  |  |  |  |
| 10 FORMER OCCUPATION OF DECEASED   |  |   |  | Did an operation precede death? <i>No</i> Date of _____  |  |  |  |
| (a) _____ (Trade or occupation or kind of work)  |  |   |  | Was there an autopsy? <i>No</i>  |  |  |  |
| (b) _____ (Kind of industry)   |  |   |  | (Signed) <i>B B ready</i> M.D.   |  |  |  |
| (c) From _____ to _____ (Date from which to which so employed)   |  |   |  | Address <i>Windsor St</i>  |  |  |  |
| 11 LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (In years and months)   |  |   |  | Date <i>Apr 15 1920</i>  |  |  |  |
| (a) At place of death _____  |  |   |  | State the Disease causing Death, or in death from Violent Causes, state (1) Means and Nature of Injury, (2) whether Accidental, Suicidal or Homicidal. |  |  |  |
| (b) In province _____  |  |   |  | 23 Registrar's Record Number _____   |  |  |  |
| (c) In Canada (if an immigrant) _____  |  |   |  | 24 Filed <i>April 15</i> 19 <i>20</i> <i>Arthur L Sanford</i> Division Registrar   |  |  |  |
| 12 Name of father <i>William Some</i>  |  | 13 Birthplace of father (Province or country) <i>West fauld</i> |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14 Maiden name of mother <i>Stacie Seal</i>  |  | 15 Birthplace of mother (Province or country) <i>West fauld</i> |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16 Informant's name <i>Stanley Johnson</i>   |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |
| Address <i>napleton</i>  |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17 Relationship to deceased <i>wife</i>  |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18 Place of burial, cremation or removal <i>Windsor</i>  |  | Date of burial <i>April 16 1920</i>                             |  |  |  |  |  |
| 19 Undertaker <i>Windsor</i>   |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |
| (Name and Address)   |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |
| SEC. 46—Vital Statistics Act makes it the duty of the Undertaker or person acting as Undertaker to obtain all the particulars required in the "Certificate of Registration of Death" and to file the same with the Division Registrar who shall issue the burial permit. |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |
| (OVER)   |  |   |  |  |  |  |  |

Figure 14: Gertrude Some's Death Certificate. Nova Scotia Historical Vital Statistics, Nova Scotia Archives

We know nothing about Charlie Some's family or early life in Natal. Although we can speculate, we can ultimately never know for certain what motivated him to leave South Africa, nor when or how he came to Canada. We do not know when or where he met and married Gertrude, what work sustained them, or what their life was like in Africville. We will never know why Charlie Some enlisted, nor how he felt about his service. The circumstances of his murder will always be a mystery.

People's feelings, motivations, and experiences are elusive for historians. But the historical record is silent on Charlie (and Gertrude) Some for other reasons, too: the lives of ordinary people seldom leave much trace, especially when those people were marginalized. Furthermore, the choices of governments, militaries, and institutions such as archives and libraries have contributed to this silence as well. Many Halifax police records and court documents for the period were destroyed. The population of Africville is not fully represented in the census or city directories. The postmortem performed on Charlie Some's body, and the French police report on his murder, are missing from his file, and we have not yet been able to locate those documents elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> Much of the documentation related to the trials of French colonial soldiers in the First World War was destroyed, including the files related to Charlie Some's alleged murderer. French and British newspapers of the period give no indication of the racial violence that occurred in their communities -- nothing appears in local papers on the date of Some's assault at Bramshott or of his murder in the Jura, though the minutiae of camp and village life was otherwise recorded in detail.

These holes in the documentary evidence have made it challenging to reconstruct Charlie Some's story, but the effort to capture his experience is nevertheless worthwhile. The lives of ordinary people are a crucial window on the past. Probing these kinds of silences is the only way to bring the marginalized out of obscurity and to illuminate histories that would otherwise remain hidden.



Figure 15: Private Charlie Some  
Photo: Collection of Anthony Sherwood

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<sup>55</sup> The postmortem, performed by Captain Scarlett, CAMC, was submitted to French authorities on September 25, 1918.

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War Diary, 26<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion

War Diary, 17<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion

War Diary, 7<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion

War Diary, CFC France HQ

War Diary, Jura Group HQ

War Diary, No. 5 District HQ

War Diary, Canadian Hospital, Etchinghill

War Diary, No. 12 Canadian Hospital, Bramshott

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RG 9 III C 8 vol. 4516 file 11, Correspondence, No. 5 District, Canadian Forestry Corps

RG 9 III C 8 vol. 4517 file 43, Correspondence, No. 5 District, Canadian Forestry Corps

RG 9 II B 9 vol. 39 file 748, Nominal Roll, No. 2 Construction Battalion, March 1917

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