



Al Jones

Birthplace:

Toronto, Ontario

Birth Year:

1960

Relationship:

Great-grandson of First World War veteran Jeremiah Jones

Branch:

Canadian Army

About the clip

Approximately 1,300 Black Canadians served in the Canadian military during the First World War. Some who wanted to enlist were turned away at local recruiting centres because of restrictions based on race. As the war went on, Black Canadians demanded the opportunity to serve. Some were assigned to the mostly segregated No. 2 Construction Battalion, while others served in the infantry, artillery, and in other units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Jeremiah Jones, who lied about his age to enlist at the age of 58, fought in the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917, where he showed great bravery in capturing a German machine gun nest. In this clip, Al Jones, Jeremiah Jones' great-grandson, explains what Jeremiah Jones' legacy means to him.

Transcript

Al Jones: The stories about Jeremiah Jones, my great-grandfather, would have come from my aunts and my father, who, on the Jones side, would talk about this proud guy, their granddaddy, who they felt was very proud, and would start to share that he went to war. And he fought representing . . .

Where other Blacks wound up — I didn't know where they wound up 'til later, but it was the

No. 2 Construction Battalion — but Jeremiah and his brother found a way to actually fight and be involved in the fighting unit.

So, growing up as a kid, you know, Remembrance Day was something that was important, where my aunts and my dad would let us know that, “Your family’s been actively involved in World War I.” And those things began to resonate.

Interviewer: *Tell us what he did do during the First World War.*

Al Jones: I’ll tell you the story.

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Al Jones: So, the story goes that . . . So, Jeremiah Jones, at the time war broke out, wanted to fight like everybody else. He wanted to be engaged in the Canadian military. So, he had to find a way to do that. He’d lied about his age to get in. He knew that if he went to Halifax and enlisted in Halifax, he would be set up with the No. 2 Construction Battalion. So, he and his brother found out that, if they went to — and I don’t know if it’s Springhill or Sydney, some other place in Nova Scotia — if they enlisted there, they would be attached to a fighting unit.

I told you he lied about his age. He was 58 years old. So, he was much older than he should have been to enlist. He was about 6’3” or 6’4”. He was a tall gentleman. And then he went over and was attached to a fighting unit. A few Black men that were attached to a fighting unit at Vimy.

And the story goes that, at the time, they were under heavy fire, and there was a machine gun nest that was really keeping them pinned down. And my great-great-grandfather volunteered to take over, to go and take out the machine gun nest. And the story, as it’s passed on to us, is that he’d gone over the hill, threw a hand grenade into the machine gun nest and was able to get these guys to march back and drop down the machine guns. Said to their commanding officer, “Is this any good?” So, they expand on the story by saying, “Imagine if you’re on the German side.” And, as I said, my great-grandfather grew up in Nova Scotia, and a lot of Nova Scotia and The Marsh was settled by Dutch. So, he’d learnt to speak German because, they said, he wanted to impress a girl at a farm nearby, or something like that, but he knew some German. And so, the story goes that, as he comes over the hill at Vimy . . . You know, out of the blackness, out of the fog comes this huge Black man speaking German. And the Germans would have said, “The devil’s coming! The devil’s coming!” because who speaks German? And who’s seen a Black guy that’s six-foot-something?

Throws the hand grenade in, and they just surrender, and they march and drop their machine gun, as I said, in front of the commanding officer’s feet. And he has them carry their guns. And then — “Is this any good to you?” And so, it was well recorded that that had taken place and that people were very impressed with that.

It was written up, but the army, at the time, recognized that happened but was never recognized for any type of medal of valour for that type of work that was done. He was eventually injured at Vimy Ridge and wound up at a hospital to recover, and shortly thereafter was brought home because of his injuries.

So, the story about Jeremiah Jones, and the Jones family in particular, was to be very proud of who you are, to present yourself in a very confident and proud way because you and your family have contributed to the fabric of Canada for many generations and should be very, very proud of that.