



## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

# French Canadians in the Canadian Military Since Confederation

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## Historical Overview

For the first 100 years after Confederation in 1867, the Canadian military was not a welcoming environment for French Canadians or the French language. Few French Canadians were inclined to join, and the military was not interested in integrating French into its organization. Happily, since the 1970s this situation largely has been rectified.



In this recruitment poster, a soldier of the 150th Battalion urges his fellow French Canadians to enlist. Because this battalion was unable to meet its authorized strength, it was broken up and its members were sent as reinforcements to the 22nd Battalion, the only French-Canadian battalion that served at the front during the First World War.

Canadiens Français Enrôlez-Vous au  
150ième Carabiniers Mont Royal / CWM 19820376-009  
Canadian War Museum

## 1867 to 1914

In the period between Confederation and the First World War in 1914, most French Canadians, the vast majority of whom resided in Quebec, lived in rural areas and many were unilingual. Few had any contact or familiarity with the tiny Canadian regular army or part-time militia. The military's command, administration, and officer education were in English. The few French-language militia units, which were already understrength, used French only for informal internal communication — even military commands were given in English.

Very few training manuals had been translated into French and promotion depended on the ability to speak English.

Canada was preparing to support Britain in the event of an overseas conflict. However, without cultural ties to Britain, most French Canadians opposed this and worried about the government imposing conscription, or mandatory military service.

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## 1914 to 1918

War between Britain and Germany began in August 1914. The organization of the Canadian Expeditionary Force was almost entirely in English, and this made recruiting French Canadians difficult. The creation of the 22nd Battalion as the only French-language overseas infantry unit helped, but French Canadians serving in other units did so in

English. Conscription was enacted in 1917, and this embittered many francophones. It is difficult to know with certainty the number of French Canadians among the 619,000 people who served during the war (almost half of whom were born in the British Isles or other countries). A recent study claims that it might be 70,000, including many conscripts.

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## 1919 to 1939

In the interwar period, defence budgets were slashed and the military establishment shrank to almost nothing. The 22nd Battalion, redesignated the Royal 22<sup>e</sup> Régiment, was made an infantry regiment of the regular army but it and the 14 francophone militia units had very

few active soldiers. Only in these units could people use French, and they still needed to speak English well if they wanted to be promoted. This, along with bad memories of being forced into military service, made it harder to recruit francophone soldiers.

## 1939 to 1945

The Second World War broke out in September 1939, and this time the army mobilized more French-language units for overseas service and home defence duties. Eventually, four francophone infantry battalions, an artillery regiment, other smaller army units, and an air force bomber squadron served overseas. Few French Canadians served in the navy, which operated in English.

Overall, English remained the military's language of communication, command, and much of its training. By 1944, up to 19 percent of Canada's army, including volunteers and home defence conscripts, were francophone at a time when francophones made up about 28 percent of the Canadian population. Historian Serge Bernier estimates that francophone Quebec volunteers numbered between 84,000 and 91,000.

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## 1945 to 1968

Postwar tensions between the West and the Soviet Union stimulated unprecedented Canadian military spending in peacetime. The military slowly began accommodating the French language and, in 1952, opened the *Collège militaire royal* in St-Jean, Quebec, that provided French-language education to officer cadets.

Brooke Claxton, the postwar defence minister, stated in 1951 that "both languages should be treated the same and both ethnic groups...given equal opportunities in the Canadian services." Some senior officers remained resistant, arguing against the expenses of bilingualism.



Hélène Le Scelleur, right, is awarded the General Campaign Star – SOUTH-WEST ASIA by Guy Laroche, commander of Joint Task Force Afghanistan, Rotation 4, in February 2008. To learn more about how Le Scelleur embraces her identity as a veteran, visit the *In Their Own Voices* online exhibition and listen to her clip.

Photo courtesy of  
Hélène Le Scelleur.

## After 1968

In 1966 General Jean Victor Allard became the first French Canadian chief of the defence staff. He prioritized bilingualism in the armed forces at all levels, especially among senior officers. Two years later, the military increased the number of francophone units in the army, and a warship was crewed mainly by francophones. In addition, one fighter jet squadron and one helicopter squadron operated mainly in French.

In 1969 the federal government enacted the *Official Languages Act* that required all federal institutions, including the armed forces, to become bilingual. By the 1970s, the armed forces aimed for proportional linguistic representation among its personnel and to ensure that French Canadians could serve in their own language as much as feasible. Today that goal has largely been achieved.