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Struck off Strength and from Memory
A Profile of the Deserters of the 165th (Acadian) Battalion, 1916

GREGORY KENNEDY

Abstract: This article uses an exceptional archival source, the register of deserters for the 165th (Acadian) Battalion, to study the little understood phenomenon of desertion during the recruitment and training of new units in Canada during the First World War. By 1916, national enrollment numbers were in stark decline, and yet this Acadian unit was able to attract nearly 900 recruits. However, approximately 200 of them deserted before the unit left for Europe. Employing techniques of longitudinal analysis with military records and national censuses, the article identifies trends with regard to who was more likely to desert and why, and also examines the reintegration of deserters and soldiers into civil society after the war.

The centenary of the First World War has provided numerous opportunities to commemorate the undeniable valour and sacrifices of Canadian soldiers. More than ever before, historians have moved beyond an analysis of politicians and generals to offer more comprehensive accounts of the war and, in particular, the diverse experiences of ordinary soldiers at the front and of their families at home.

We are engaged by a curiosity about ordinary people who, seventy-five or a hundred years ago, found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. We wonder about the young man in uniform who smiles down from the old photograph in the high school. About the family whose grief is

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manifest in the glorious stained-glass window in the church. About the young woman who trained to be a nurse in the hospital and whom war robbled of a career of compassion and caring...Behind each name is a life, behind each photo a person worth knowing.1

For a long time, discussing topics like desertion was considered inappropriate, even disrespectful to our veterans. Nevertheless, in recent years there have been a few studies about military justice. During the First World War, twenty-three Canadian soldiers were killed by firing squad for desertion on the battlefield.2 In 2001, these soldiers received official pardons from the Canadian government and their names were added to Parliament Hill’s *Book of Remembrance*. During the war, hundreds of other soldiers were court-martialled for desertion and received less severe punishments. Thousands more faced summary justice and minor punishments for absence without leave from their units. The general conclusion is that discipline was a continual challenge and soldiers did leave their units, especially when the fighting was at its most brutal, but the military justice system was flexible to deal with a variety of situations and gradually adapted to ensure that soldiers were heard and that authority was maintained.3 As professional historians, we cannot ignore these aspects of the history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) because the subject might seem taboo or convey a lack of deference. The issues around discipline influenced operational effectiveness, engaged and troubled military authorities, and were at the heart of the experiences of ordinary soldiers.

This article is not about desertion on the battlefield but rather about desertion during the recruiting and training of new units back in Canada. If we know a little bit about deserters overseas, we know virtually nothing about those who simply abandoned their units before they ever departed Canada. Thousands of men volunteered for military service, but then changed their minds at some point

along the way. Desmond Morton claims that units routinely lost a quarter of their strength to desertion. Studies of individual units have highlighted the impact of these losses and the instability and frustration that they produced. In one extreme case, the 41st Battalion lost 600 of 1,000 recruits in this way. And yet, studies of this phenomenon of desertion while still in Canada are “practically non-existent.” What can we say about these men? Who chose to desert and why?

This article concerns the 165th (Acadian) Battalion. Created in December, 1915, the unit recruited nearly 900 men in 1916, but embarked for England in March, 1917, with a strength of only 532. The losses were explained in part by more rigorous medical exams in the early months of 1917, but nearly 200 men had already deserted by that time. In other words, about one in five of the recruits quit the unit sometime during 1916. The 165th Battalion is noteworthy as the only Acadian Battalion, but also because its records include a register containing detailed information about the deserters and when they left. By linking the soldiers with the information from their military attestation papers and their 1911 Canadian census returns, we can develop a socioeconomic profile that can help us better understand who deserted and why. We can further link these soldiers to their 1921 Canadian census returns, to compare what deserters and the other soldiers of the 165th Battalion were doing after the war. In addition to shedding light on the particular circumstances of the 165th Battalion, the results of this analysis will provide insights into the challenges of recruiting and training at a time when fewer and fewer Canadians were willing to serve. During 1916, recruiting fell from 30,000 monthly to just 3,000 monthly and the government was desperate to find more volunteers. While there were certainly specific circumstances surrounding the raising of an Acadian national unit, these challenges were not unique to the 165th Battalion, applying

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7 Claude E. Leger, *Le bataillon acadien de la Première Guerre mondiale*, (Moncton, 2001), 144.
also to other new units across the Maritime Provinces, and even more broadly across Canada. Looking forward to 1921 can also reveal clues about the postwar reintegration of soldiers into civil society, something that appears to have been easier for those who came home early and of their own accord.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that Acadians were not more prone to desertion than any other group in Canada. Some units lost an even larger proportion of their recruits. In general, French-Canadians in the CEF have been stigmatized for their supposed lack of discipline. However, recent studies conclusively demonstrate that French-Canadian soldiers were no more or less likely than their Anglophone colleagues to desert. Only sixty-one French-Canadians were found guilty of the formal charge of desertion (or attempt to desert) throughout the war, out of at least 35,000 French-Canadian soldiers.9 In fact, recent research suggests that the number of French-Canadians in the CEF was potentially much higher, in part because francophone minority groups including the Acadians were not considered in previous studies.10 Maxime Dagenais has found that the 22nd (French-Canadian) Battalion did have a higher rate of summary trials and courts martial for a variety of offences when compared with other battalions at the front, but this was due to transitions in leadership and the large losses and subsequent reconstitution of the unit during the Battle of the Somme.11 So to be clear, the choice of the 165th (Acadian) Battalion for this study of desertion has nothing to do with criticizing a particular linguistic or ethnic group, but rather comes out of a larger research project seeking to include this unit in the larger history of Canada’s First World War as well as the availability of some unique, comprehensive, and accessible documentary sources that can provide important insights into the history of this unit as well as that of the CEF as a whole.

9 Bouvier, Déserteurs et insoumis, 124.
11 Dagenais, “Une permission! C’est bon pour une recrue,” 7.
PUBLIC PRESSURE, NATIONALISM, AND THE 165TH BATTALION

Despite little effort by the military to recruit in Francophone counties of the Maritime provinces, some Acadians had volunteered since the early days of the war. However, they were largely invisible to outside observers because they were soon integrated into Anglophone Maritime battalions such as the 26th (New Brunswick) Battalion or the 22nd (French-Canadian) Battalion. Military attestation papers did not record the language or ethnicity of the volunteers, so it has also been difficult for historians retrospectively to track the participation of minority groups like the Acadians in the CEF. Most often, we have to fall back on family names, but these were often misspelled or anglicized either by the volunteer or the recruiting sergeant. Generally speaking, the Acadians appear to have followed broader regional trends, enrolling in numbers similar to those of other rural inhabitants of the Maritime provinces.

Desmond Morton affirms that about one-quarter of the eligible Canadian male population volunteered for military service, but as we have seen, this voluntary enlistment dropped precipitously during 1916. Indeed, in New Brunswick this trend was already apparent by the end of 1915. Those who wanted to go had already signed up. Morton further emphasized the intense public pressure on young men to enlist. Recruiting assemblies were held across the country to try to drum up volunteers and money for various units. For those who did not want to serve, “prudent young men quickly learned to avoid such public meetings.” Recruiting assemblies for the 165th Battalion were held in many Acadian parishes across all three Maritime provinces, with mixed results. Local clergy often actively supported enlistment, and there was music from the unit fanfare and patriotic speeches.


from unit officers and prominent parishioners. A typical event was held at Tignish, Prince Edward Island on 5 June, 1916:

Tignish est fier que nous avons des hommes en Acadie, comme M. Buote, le Capitaine Gallant et le Lieutenant Léger: fier aussi d’entendre les bonnes paroles d’encouragements de messieurs Joseph I. Arsenault, Sylvain F. Gaudet et Joseph Chiasson, qui tour à tour adressèrent la parole, en exhortant les jeunes gens de faire leur devoir en s’enrôlant dans le bataillon national, le 165ième. Après l’assemblée bon nombre de jeunes hommes signifièrent leur intention de s’enrôler aussitôt après les travaux du printemps et la saison de la pêche terminée.

The call to create their own national battalion placed intense and very specific public pressure on young Acadians to enlist that went beyond the general Canadian call to serve. On the one hand, Anglophone newspapers and pundits criticized (unfairly) the supposed unwillingness of Acadians to volunteer, creating a very tense political environment especially in New Brunswick. The success of the 165th could prove these critics wrong. On the other hand, Acadian leaders saw in the war the opportunity to gain recognition and rights for their minority group through loyal service. The Acadian battalion would be French-speaking, Acadian-led, and served by Catholic chaplains. Acadian newspapers like L’Évangéline provided extensive coverage of the recruiting efforts and included many patriotic editorials. Well aware of the scrutiny that their unit would face, one Acadian writer declared somewhat naively that the 165th Battalion “must be perfect” and should be led by officers with “perfect morality, conduct, and reputation.”

As the end of the quotation from Tignish underlines, young men had family and work obligations that competed with their possible desire to enlist. My research has shown that the volunteers for the

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17 Leger, Le bataillon acadien, 100-02.
18 « Chez nos militaires : le 165e bataillon acadien, assemblée de recrutement, » L’Évangéline, le 14 juin 1916, Centre d’études acadiennes Anselme-Chiasson (CEAAC).
20 Leger, Le bataillon acadien, 63.
21 « Notre bataillon acadien, » L’Évangéline, le 15 mars 1916, CEAAC.
165th Battalion were broadly representative of Acadian society at this time, but came particularly from young men and teenagers who were highly mobile and actively looking for work. On average, the volunteers were considerably younger than their counterparts in other units of the CEF. There were certainly a few soldiers who left good jobs to join the Acadian national battalion, but most of the volunteers were unemployed or underemployed as general labourers in the farming, fishing, or forestry sectors. The Army offered a regular salary, a separation allowance for next of kin, and other advantages like food, clothing, and shelter. Of course, the promise of adventure and seeing other parts of the world could be attractive too. Jérôme Arsenault wrote home soon after arriving in England: “on voit bien des choses qu’on n’aurait jamais vues si on avait resté au Nouveau-Brunswick. Il n’y a rien comme être soldat.”

The nearly 200 men who quit the unit in 1916 must have had second thoughts. Whatever brought them to the unit—a sense of Acadian nationalism or public duty, the search for adventure, a regular salary—they changed their minds. Unfortunately, deserters did not write letters that were published in newspapers or submitted to local archives, so we do not have their own words to explain their decision. However, we can gain several clues through innovative use of the official sources that are available.

THE CONTEXTS OF DESERTION

The register of deserters conserved at the Centre d’études acadiennes Anselme-Chiasson (CEAAC) of the Université de Moncton includes details about when and where recruits quit the unit. By linking this information to their military attestation papers and 1911 Canadian Census results, we can conduct a longitudinal analysis to better understand the phenomenon of desertion and what may have motivated their departures.


23 Jérôme Arsenault à ses parents, le 12 avril 1917, lettre publiée le 2 mai 1917 dans L’Évangéline, CEAAC.
In broad terms, there was a period of initial enthusiasm during which the unit was getting organized and the new recruits conducted preliminary training in several depots across the Maritime provinces. By May, there were 402 men in Moncton, 76 at Meteghan, 64 at Caraquet, 60 at Antigonish, 56 at Richibuctou, and 50 at Edmundston.24 During this time, the volunteers were not far from home and they could bond with other soldiers from their region. There must have been an atmosphere of optimism and excitement as the unit came together in Moncton later that month, but for at least some of the soldiers, the departure from their home counties was the first real test. One editorialist from *L’Évangéline* noted « et aujourd’hui qu’il est tout près des deux tiers complété, on a droit d’être fier du progrès accompli, et de dire que dans quelques semaines, le 165ième sera organisé et recruté au complet. »25 However, in May we can also observe the first deserters, a total of fourteen leaving in May and June. Reading the same newspaper article between the lines, we can see that people were already aware that support for military service was not universal. The writer pontificated that the mothers in Acadia must be as brave as those of France and support the sacrifice of their sons, suggesting that family pressure was preventing recruitment and, perhaps in some cases, encouraging

25 « En avant le 165e, » le 31 mai 1916, *L’Évangéline*, CEAAC.
volunteers to come home. The assertion that Camp Valcartier should not inspire terror must have been in response to fears expressed by some about what military training would be like, and what the future held for these soldiers in a war that was increasingly murderous and recognized as such. The accounts of the terrible Battle of the Somme during the summer of 1916 must have caused at least some soldiers or members of their families to question the good sense of continuing with military service.

The 850 soldiers of the 165th Battalion boarded the train for Camp Valcartier 8 July 1916, receiving an apparently enthusiastic send-off from the citizens of Moncton despite torrential rain.26 A period of intensive training, but also long waits, vaccinations, and kit inspections awaited them. Before long, some of the volunteers decided that army life was not for them. Half of all of the deserters (93 of 187) quit that summer. Not surprisingly, newspaper reports are silent on this trend, preferring to underline participation in parade reviews for distinguished visitors like the Duke of Connaught, the Governor General of Canada.27 Private Dismas Daigle wrote home that the Prime Minister Robert Borden had observed that their unit

26 « Le départ du bataillon acadien, » Le 8 juillet 1916, Le Moniteur acadien, CEAAC.
27 « Le 165e à Valcartier, » Le 17 août 1916, Le Moniteur acadien, CEAAC.
Postcard from the 165th Bn, Camp Valcartier, 1916. [Image courtesy of Jonathan Vance, Western University]
was one of the best in Canada. He also commented “je ne travaille pas dur et mon seul regret est de ne pas avoir joint le régiment il y a quatre mois.”

In a rare postcard, three Acadian soldiers are depicted posing with their bayonets. They comment that they have become so “terribly lean” that they look like the devil and explain that the bayonets are the “swords” that are placed on the end of their guns. Recent research has suggested that many soldiers of the CEF actually gained weight and became healthier during their military service, so long as they were not critically wounded. These young men certainly seem to have been proud of getting in shape and learning to become soldiers; one had already been promoted to Corporal.

The postcard captures another important dynamic of military life—the camaraderie between small groups of friends. Volunteers from Acadian communities often signed up together so, not surprisingly, they also chose to desert together. For example, Onesime Goguen and Jacques Michaud were both 22 years old and from the village of Saint-André in Madawaska County, New Brunswick. They signed up together in Moncton on 5 April 1916 and left just twenty-eight days later on 3 May. In Valcartier, this trend continued. Eight recruits quit the unit on 13 July 1916 alone. Four of them were from the village of Bouctouche, in Kent County, New Brunswick, including two men, Alfred Richard and Laurent Sawyer, who had enrolled together in Moncton on 14 May. Some people took an instant dislike to military life. Joseph Lefebvre signed up on 9 August 1916 in Meteghan, Digby County, Nova Scotia. He was promptly sent by train to join the unit at Valcartier and deserted upon arrival, 12 August. Others may have been underwhelmed by the 165th Battalion itself. Jarvis Mitton and Warren McFayden were transfers in from the 132nd Battalion and the 105th Battalion respectively, and they left together on 29 June, shortly after arriving at the 165th Battalion.

Desertion could be contagious. The numbers climbed into August and beyond. The worst single day was 21 September 1916, in which eleven recruits abandoned the cause, including several non-

28 Dismas P. Daigle, le 27 juillet 1916, publié le 10 août 1916 dans Le Moniteur acadien, CEAC.
Francophones. It is interesting that some of these men stayed as long as they did, given that the instruction would have been given in French. Perhaps they were promised transfers to Anglophone units once their training at Valcartier was complete. In any event, these soldiers became impatient and took matters into their own hands. That there were problems in the unit is undeniable; even the usually ebullient Acadian newspapers rather obliquely called on people to look to the future and forget about the past as the battalion left Valcartier and travelled to Saint John for the winter.30

While in garrison, the 165th continued training and began preparations for the voyage overseas. The tempo and difficulty of training must have been much reduced, and living conditions were certainly easier; however, November was the worst single month for desertion, with forty-five or approximately one-quarter of all of the deserters deciding to leave at that point. Once again, these were often collective decisions. Three young men from Acadieville, in Kent County, New Brunswick, had enrolled together and then quit together, leaving on 5 November 1916. Martin and Emile LeBlanc, two brothers from the small community of Saint Bernard in Digby County, Nova Scotia, similarly signed up together and then abandoned the unit at the same time, in this case, 7 November. The reasons for these desertions are unclear. Onésime Babineau died of pneumonia on 1 November, and there may have been fears of sickness as the soldiers lived in close proximity to each other. Was there impatience and boredom during the long winter months? At least some soldiers had been disappointed to not be sent immediately to Europe after finishing training in Valcartier.31 Once back in New Brunswick, some soldiers may have been enticed away by family fears, missing home, or competing job opportunities. Desertion slowed in December, and then almost disappeared, with just two soldiers quitting the battalion between the beginning of January 1917 and when the unit boarded the ships for England in March. If those who wanted to enlist had done so by the summer of 1916, those who wanted to desert seem to have done so by the end of November. Those who remained were committed to seeing their service through.

Very few of the deserters faced consequences for their actions. The Militia Act of 1904 set seven days as the period after which a soldier

30 « Le bataillon acadien, » le 27 septembre 1916, L’Évangéline, CEAAC.
31 « Le bataillon acadien, » le 27 septembre 1916, L’Évangéline, CEAAC.
would be considered absent without permission, and government decrees during the war established the penalty for such absences as imprisonment for up to two years. However, at the 165th Battalion, the usual procedure after noticing an absence was to wait several weeks, perhaps conducting a cursory search but mostly waiting to see if the individual returned on their own before declaring him as absent without permission. Adolphe Gaudet, a student from Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, came back after a week and the register notes that he had simply “overstayed” his leave pass. If the person did not appear, a hearing conducted by a panel of three officers would then be convened and they would officially declare the escapee a deserter and have them “struck off strength.” Just one in eight (twenty-six men) of those in the register came back to the unit. Of these, fourteen came willingly and their hearings were cancelled, while twelve were apprehended. All of them “rejoined strength” without further incident. The register makes no mention of punishments in these cases, and it seems that the battalion leadership were content to welcome back those who had left, no doubt due to their concern about filling out the ranks. In fact, of the nearly 200 cases of desertion recorded in the register, only three resulted in serious punishments. All three involved men from Sackville, in Westmorland County, New Brunswick, who had enrolled in 1915 in other battalions (two of them in the 55th Battalion) and subsequently transferred to the 165th. They were each sentenced to six months imprisonment. A fourth man, George Fournier, was caught and handed over to his former unit, the 163rd Battalion, a Francophone unit based in Montréal, Québec.

It seems then that the recruits had little to fear from military authorities. The unit certainly had few resources to chase them. The chances of a deserter being found were remote, and even if they were—or if they chose to return—they would be reintegrated into the unit without facing serious consequences. Of course, a few individuals did end up serving prison terms, but these were exceptional cases involving soldiers who had been in the CEF much longer. We might wonder if more rigorous discipline might have resulted in fewer desertions. While one newspaper article lauded the unit leadership for the battalion’s supposedly excellent discipline, editorials sometimes commented on the inexperience of the commanding officer, Lieutenant-

32 Bouvier, *Déserteurs et insoumis*, 38-41.
33 Leger, *Le bataillon acadien*, 111.
Colonel Louis Cyriaque Daigle. On the other hand, a reputation for severity would likely have repercussions on the ongoing recruiting efforts. We might also wonder how the deserters were received at home. Did families simply welcome their “delinquent” children back or did desertion carry a stigma? Later in this article we will look at some clues provided by the 1921 Canadian Census.

It was normal for some volunteers to simply not be suited for military life. However, only a small proportion of the deserters quit after just a few weeks of service. The largest group trained for five to nine months before leaving. This suggests that it was not the challenges of training or social integration into the unit that were at fault but rather that, with time, soldiers had opportunities to reflect on their decisions, learn more about the war, and perhaps consider other employment options. We might also wonder about private correspondence between soldiers and their families; perhaps some of the recruits were under pressure to come home. The newspapers commented mournfully on the apparently diminishing public support for the unit. An assembly organized by Daigle, 21 December 1916, in Moncton was so poorly attended that the journalist was moved to comment that he “sincerely hoped” that the friends of the unit were more numerous than the handful who showed up to the meeting. He argued that “nous devons mettre de côté les divergences d’opinion qui ont pu surgir autour de la formation du bataillon à cause des quelques points faibles que l’on a pu ou qu’on peut encore trouver chez lui.” What were these “weak points” that provoked “divergent opinions”? If popular enthusiasm could motivate volunteers to enrol, it should be no surprise that popular disinterest or criticism could also encourage recruits to desert.

A PROFILE OF ACADIAN SOLDIERS AND DESERTERS

Despite the apparent lack of consequences, the decision to desert was still serious and undoubtedly made for specific, individual reasons. While statistics could not possibly capture all of these circumstances, a quantitative approach does enable us to determine if there were

34 “Notes de Valcartier,” le 23 août 1916, L’Évangéline; “Le bataillon acadien,” le 27 septembre 1916, L’Évangéline, CEAAC.
35 “Le bataillon acadien,” le 28 décembre 1916, Le Moniteur acadien, CEAAC.
particular trends that might help to identify who was more likely to desert and why. A database of all 887 soldiers is possible thanks to the military records and Canadian censuses. The database includes information on the origins and occupations of the soldiers, their ages and marital status, and also their families. I have divided the soldiers of the 165th Battalion into soldiers and deserters. This division is a little arbitrary since they all signed up to be soldiers. In addition, some of those who did not desert were nevertheless discharged due to medical exams or for other reasons, like being underage, before the unit left for Europe. However, the two groups make sense in the context of our objective here: to conduct a deeper analysis of those who left and those who stayed in 1916.

We might wonder if the deserters tended to be younger or older members of the unit. According to official records, eighty-four of the deserters were 18 to 21 years old, and an additional seventy were 22 to 29 years old. A handful (five) were younger than 18, while fourteen deserters were older than 30 years old. These results are not too revealing as they, generally speaking, correspond with the age profile of the unit as a whole. For example, a simple calculation of the average age of deserters and soldiers reveals little difference. The 187 deserters had an average age of 23.18, while that of the remaining soldiers was 22.82. However, we know that volunteers sometimes concealed their true ages, often because they were too young or too old according to military regulations, and sometimes because they simply wanted to be considered as more mature than they actually were. We can correct the declared age at enrolment by linking the recruits to their 1911 Canadian Census data. The results demonstrate that for the battalion as a whole, fully one in four recruits were underage, and a few were as young as fifteen or even thirteen years old. The actual average age at enrolment was 22.65 in the case of the deserters, and 22.10 for the other soldiers. Although we can definitively say that deserters were not significantly older or younger than the rest of the unit, there are differences that emerge when we conduct a comparison by age group.

The youngest (underage) recruits were much less likely to desert than their older counterparts, while volunteers in their twenties were much more likely to quit the unit. There are a number of reasons why teenagers might have been less inclined to leave. They might have been more fearful or respectful of military authorities, more susceptible to the appeals of patriotism and adventure, or simply had fewer responsibilities waiting for them at home. We should not overstate the case – nearly one in five of the deserters was under 18, and about one-half were 21 or younger. Why would those concealing their age be less likely to desert than those just barely 18? It seems unlikely that parents would have supported the enlistment of children in their early teens in the first place; perhaps the act of rebellion made it more difficult for those same children to come home voluntarily. Parental responses to their children signing up were diverse. In one exceptional case, Albert Pothier of Wedgeport, in Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia, followed his son and enlisted as well, concealing the fact that he was too old (he was 53 years old and the official maximum was 45) so that he could serve alongside him.

Meanwhile, relatively older men usually had more responsibilities at home and may have simply had better opportunities to desert as fully grown adults who could easily travel and work anywhere, including in the United States. For example, just 13 per cent of the volunteers were married, but husbands accounted for 26 per cent of the deserters. In other words, married men were twice as likely to desert from the 165th Battalion. Newspaper editorials focused on the perceived unwillingness of mothers to let their sons serve, but at least
some wives must have been against their husbands going away, even if it did bring a small monthly allowance from the government. Indeed, at the beginning of the war, wives could petition to block their husbands from serving. By the summer of 1915, this was no longer the case.\textsuperscript{38} While seasonal work and temporary absences might not have been unusual for some Acadians, particularly those working in the fishing or forestry sectors, extended time away with no end in sight as well as the dangers of military life may have presented a significant economic and psychological burden on families.\textsuperscript{39} Pragmatism must also have weighed heavily on the decisions of some of these breadwinners to enlist and desert. For example, Willie Daigle of South Tetagouche, in Gloucester County, New Brunswick left a wife and at least four children behind when he enlisted in the 165th Battalion. They had always struggled to make ends meet. In 1911, Daigle’s family was living with his wife’s parents to save money, while Willie worked for meagre earnings in lumber camps. When he signed up in June 1916, Willie was still residing apart from his wife and children, working as a general labourer further north in Restigouche County. Enlisting in the 165th Battalion may have provided a welcome summer job, but Willie quit in November, probably to head back to the winter lumber camps. In 1921, we find him back in the saw mills near Bathurst. In this case, time with the Army appears to have been opportunistic, a way to complement seasonal employment elsewhere.

We can take a closer look at the occupational backgrounds of soldiers and deserters. At first glance, there were few obvious differences. People working in fishing and sales were slightly less likely to desert, while those in agriculture and forestry were slightly more likely. General labourers were by far the largest occupational group declared by the volunteers. This is not surprising given the many young people among them. This is a notoriously vague label that could mean anything from helping out around the family farm to wage work in a city, from part-time to full-time, from seasonal to permanent. All that we can say from this is that general labourers were somewhat more likely to desert.

Fortunately, the 1911 Canadian Census provides additional data on these individuals and their occupations. For example, just over half of the deserters already had a job in 1911 (52 per cent), with most of

\textsuperscript{38} Morton, \textit{Fight or Pay}, 44.

\textsuperscript{39} Morton, \textit{When Your Number’s Up}, 235.
them working as general labourers earning less than $1.00 dollar per day or as farmers. About one in five were still in school, and another one in four were illiterate. Meanwhile, only about one-third of the other soldiers had a job in 1911 (36 per cent), and more of them were still in school (40 per cent). Of course, this is partly explained by the fact that there were more teenagers in the soldiers group. However, another hypothesis is beginning to emerge, namely that those who deserted were more likely to come from lower socioeconomic status or underemployed groups. Among the volunteers who stayed there were fewer small farmers and more tradesmen, salesmen, and public servants making more than $1.00 per day in 1911. Only 15 per cent of the soldiers were illiterate, and a higher percentage were also bilingual, another indication of education. Desmond Morton once wrote that idealists were more common than idlers in the CEF.\textsuperscript{40} This data suggests that idealists may not have been more numerous among the volunteers for the 165th Battalion, but they were probably more likely to stay.

The language data from the 1911 Census also allows us to confirm that non-Francophones were much more likely to desert the 165th (Acadian) Battalion. The census included a clear question about commonly speaking English and French. Fully one in five of the deserters did not commonly speak French and were either English-

\textsuperscript{40} Morton, \textit{When Your Number’s Up}, 51.
speaking Maritimers or in a couple of exceptional cases, recent immigrants from Europe. Laurence Giabbi was an Italian immigrant working in Saint John who enlisted in December 1916 and deserted the following day. It is not surprising that non-French speakers did not find their place in the 165th Battalion, but we might wonder why they did not transfer to another unit, instead of quitting entirely. Institutional barriers to inter-unit transfers may have been partially to blame. Certainly, some people complained that other units were not supporting the transfers of Acadians serving in other units to the 165th: « l’intérêt spirituel de nos soldats et l’intérêt national de toute la race, exigent le transfert de nos soldats dans le bataillon national. » In an atmosphere where all of these new units were struggling to fill their ranks, it is not surprising that commanding officers were reluctant to approve transfers of any kind.

Desertion was clearly not restricted to non-Francophones, as four out of five deserters were Acadian volunteers. An analysis of declared residence at enrolment reveals some interesting trends. Those residing outside of the Maritime provinces before signing up were twice as likely to desert (8 per cent) than to stay (4 per cent). These individuals could quickly flee across provincial and international borders and may have felt less attached to the battalion as a nationalist project based in the Maritime Provinces. Meanwhile, those living in Nova Scotia were much more likely to stay (24 per cent) than to desert (7 per cent). Did Acadians from Nova Scotia identify more strongly with the cause, or did they simply have less opportunity to leave? The majority of the volunteers came from New Brunswick. We might assume that larger groups of soldiers from this province would have facilitated stronger ties to the unit, however, New Brunswick Acadians were significantly more likely to desert; 83 per cent of the deserters were from New Brunswick, as compared with 70 per cent of those who remained. What is more, particular counties were considerably overrepresented among the deserters. For example, nearly one in five of the deserters (18 per cent) lived in Kent County, as compared with about one in eight of the other soldiers (13 per cent). Even more striking are the results for Westmorland County. Nearly 40 per cent of the deserters lived there, against just one-quarter of the other soldiers. In total, well over half of the deserters (57 per cent) were from these two counties in southeastern New Brunswick. Meanwhile,

41 « Notre Bataillon acadien, » le 15 mars 1916, Évangéline, CEAAC.
soldiers residing in Gloucester County, in northern New Brunswick, were twice as likely to stay (16 per cent) as to desert (8 per cent).

What can explain these regional disparities? Were volunteers from some areas less motivated to fight or less nationalistic than others? This would certainly be hard to prove. Why were the same regions that provided the most volunteers also more likely to harbour deserters? We might wonder if soldiers living in southeastern New Brunswick had more opportunity to desert than their counterparts from other areas of the Maritime provinces. At first glance, this seems unlikely. From a geographic standpoint, the unit was in Valcartier, Québec for training during the summer of 1916 and so everyone would have had a long journey home, with soldiers from northern New Brunswick being the closest. Despite this geographic proximity, they were amongst the least likely to desert. Similarly, when the unit moved into garrison in Saint John, soldiers from Saint John County rarely deserted despite having their families nearby. We have already seen that there was virtually no desertion when the soldiers were first training in local depots close to home; it seems that close proximity to home favoured soldiers staying rather than leaving. This still leaves the Nova Scotia Acadians as an exceptional group who appear to have been much more committed to the unit despite their distance from home.

All regions had at least some deserters, but the majority of them came from southeastern New Brunswick including many residing in the city of Moncton itself. This area also provided the largest group of volunteers in the first place. These results speak to the socioeconomic conditions of the volunteers from this region: the 165th Battalion drew disproportionately from the most mobile sector of the Acadian population—young, unmarried men actively searching for work. Most of the soldiers had already moved from their birthplace to another residence before joining the Army and they tended to move into towns and especially larger urban centres like Moncton, New Brunswick. For example, of the 164 men who declared Moncton as their residence when they enrolled, just twenty-one had been born there. There was a significant net emigration of young men from Kent County, New Brunswick, one of the poorer areas of the Maritimes provinces due to limited jobs and arable land. The men fitting this profile were most likely to enlist in the 165th Battalion, and also the most likely to desert, suggesting that many of them saw military service as one of several employment options and were prepared to leave if something
else came along. During the war, wages rose considerably at home, even for unskilled labourers, while the military salary of $1.10 per day remained stagnant.\textsuperscript{42} At least some of the volunteers must have been enticed home by better paying jobs; this might explain the large number who quit once the unit moved back to Saint John, especially once it became obvious that the unit was not deploying anytime soon.

**DESERTERS AND SOLDIERS OF THE 165TH BATTALION IN THE 1921 CANADIAN CENSUS**

A detailed analysis of the 1921 Canadian census results (as well as in some cases, the 1920 United States Federal Census) for the former members of the 165th Battalion is still in process. However, the preliminary results suggest some interesting trends for our deserters and the other soldiers of the unit. First, while linking soldiers across multiple documents always presents certain challenges due to differences in the spelling of names and other inaccuracies, it was somewhat harder to find the deserters (48 per cent success rate) than the other soldiers (60 per cent success rate). This may have been due to multiple moves and possibly changing personal information like their names, ages, and birthplaces as part of a plan to elude authorities. By searching the Ancestry database of border documents, we were able to find some of them and, in general, determine that the deserters were more likely to cross to the United States than veterans returning home after the war. Of those deserters who could be found either in the census or immigration records, 30 per cent were residing in the United States, including several who left Canada in 1916 and 1917 undoubtedly as part of their escape strategy. As for the other soldiers, 19 per cent of those who could be located moved to the United States soon after returning home in 1919. When we consider that only 4-5 per cent of all of the members of the 165th Battalion were born in the United States, these are strong trends indicating that soldiers and particularly deserters sought refuge and employment to the south, usually with a family member or friend already residing there.

The 1921 Canadian Census (and 1920 United States Census) reveal some exceptional individual stories. François Doucet of Rexton,

\textsuperscript{42} Theobald, *The Bitter Harvest of War*, 59.
Kent County, New Brunswick, deserted while overseas and we find him serving his sentence as an inmate at a prison in Chilliwack, British Columbia in 1921. On the other hand, Leandre Foret stuck with the 165th and seems to have liked the military life as he moved to Boston and enlisted in the US Army, serving at Fort Warren. Irénée Comeau moved to Maine and enlisted in the US Marine Corps. In 1920, he was stationed at Camp Gaillard helping to defend the Panama Canal. Gilman Gagné and Maxime Daigle both moved to the Bow River District in Alberta after the war. Gilman made $2,000 per year as a coal miner, while Maxime toiled on a farm for a salary of $600. Abraham Doucet seems to have had a particularly restless spirit. After a brief time home in Grand Étang, Inverness County, Nova Scotia, we find him working at an iron foundry in Waltham, Massachusetts in 1920. He then moved out to Oklahoma as a farm labourer before crossing at Detroit in November 1921 heading to Shawinigan Falls, Québec to visit his brother. Laurent LeBlanc, who deserted from the 165th Battalion on 30 December 1916, took up a life at sea, plying his trade as a sailor from Boston Harbour until at least 1928. Another deserter, Julius Saulnier, had a particularly exceptional journey. He quit the unit in August 1916 while training in Valcartier. He fled to Massachusetts where he worked as a carpenter for several months. He crossed back to New Brunswick in June 1917 to see his family, but subsequently travelled to Toronto, crossed over at Windsor heading for Detroit and, ultimately, San Francisco, California. He enlisted in the United States Army in December 1917 and served in Europe, coming home in March 1919. He ultimately settled in Houston, Texas and died there in 1961.

Of course, the majority of the soldiers and deserters stayed in the Maritime provinces. Some interesting trends emerge for each group. For example, more of the deserters were married heads of household (56 per cent) when compared with the other soldiers (41 per cent). Deserters were somewhat more likely to have been married in the first place, but their lead more than doubled in the intervening years. The majority of the soldiers returned home to their parents and simply had not yet had the time or opportunity to get married. The extended absence may have also affected the job prospects of the returning soldiers, 28 per cent of whom declared that they were unemployed at the time of the 1921 census. In comparison, just 16 per cent of the deserters were in a similar situation. Most of those out of work were general labourers or simple tradesmen such as carpenters. Just one
deserter declared no occupation at all, as compared with twenty-seven soldiers (7 per cent). When we include those who declared no occupation, that they were back working on their father’s farm, or performing “odd jobs”, fully 45 per cent of the returning soldiers had been unsuccessful in finding steady employment.

When we examine declared occupations at enrolment and in 1921, the same proportion of soldiers were working in agriculture, however the number of deserters working as farmers had nearly doubled. Similarly, some of the deserters who had declared marginal or unskilled jobs when they enrolled had secured positions in sales or the lumber industry. It seems, then, that many of the deserters were quite successful in establishing themselves as heads of household on their own farms, or with other steady employment. As for the returning soldiers, some of them were able to find or return to good jobs in the trades, with the railroad, or in the public service, but a large contingent found themselves unemployed or underemployed as farmhands and general labourers, much as had been the case before the war.

CONCLUSION

Historians continue to debate the motivations behind enlistment during the First World War—“then and now, one can only guess why most men enlisted. Social pressure, unemployment, escape from a tiresome family or a dead-end job, self-respect, and proving one’s manhood have motivated soldiers through the ages.” The volunteers of the 165th (Acadian) Battalion had felt very specific pressures to join up, notably from their own leaders and priests, from within their own communities. The unit fell short of its recruiting target, however, and quickly started to lose men to desertion. The motivations behind desertion are also difficult to define and were undoubtedly multiple, specific, and individual. There were deserters among every age group, from every county, and from every professional background. This article has identified several general trends that emerged from a longitudinal analysis of deserters and other soldiers from 1911 through 1921.

First, non-Francophone citizens and immigrants accounted for a certain proportion of the deserters. Not surprisingly, they did not really fit into an Acadian, Catholic unit. A large group of them decided to quit as their training in Valcartier came to an end. We also see a higher rate of desertion among the small group of soldiers transferred to the 165th Battalion from other units. Perhaps they did not like what they saw upon arriving, found it difficult to integrate into a new unit, or perhaps they were already disillusioned with military life before they came. Either way, the dream of uniting Acadians serving across the CEF into a single proficient battalion was never realized.

These outsiders and exceptional transfers who likely did not feel the same drive for an Acadian national unit only tell part of the story. Many of the Acadian volunteers quit as well. Married men were more likely to leave, as were those born outside of the Maritime provinces. Recruits already well into their twenties were considerably more likely to leave than the many youths who concealed their true age to enlist. Most strikingly, the battalion’s largest source of volunteers—mobile young men from southeastern New Brunswick looking for work—were also overrepresented among the deserters. For these individuals, the army was another employment opportunity, and when the training became unpalatable or when other opportunities presented

44 Morton, When Your Number’s Up, 52.
themselves, they were as quick to leave as they had been to enlist. Finally, public support for military service in general and the Acadian Battalion in particular were far from universal. Mothers and wives prevailed upon some to stay or to come home, and problems within the unit—referred to only obliquely by the newspapers of the time, but which must have included discipline and leadership—dampened morale further as even more and more recruits walked out the door.

Most volunteers were certainly at least partially influenced by patriotism, loyalty, and nationalism. But like the young men of Tignish, Prince Edward Island who expressed interest in signing up only after the fishing season had concluded, or Willie Daigle who quit the unit when it was time to work in the lumber camps, many of them had to balance family and work responsibilities with military service. Wages at home were on the rise, at least until after the war when a recession diminished job prospects across the Maritime provinces. Judging by the results of the 1921 Canadian and 1920 United States censuses, those who quit the unit in 1916 were more likely to find regular work, get married, and establish their own households and farms than those who continued with the unit overseas. Not surprisingly, they fared better after the war as well. The deserters were also more likely to leave the Maritime provinces entirely, usually heading for the United States. It seems, then, that the act of desertion represented a significant crossroads in the life course of many young men. In general, there seemed to be little stigma and few consequences for those struck off strength from the 165th Battalion.

Desertion is an important aspect of the history of the 165th Battalion. Discipline continued to be a problem with the unit once it went overseas. Most of the soldiers ended up in the Canadian Forestry Corps and the records indicate that absences without leave were common, often combined with insubordinate behaviour or drinking.\(^{45}\) However, this was hardly unusual; recent studies of military discipline and courts martial have shown that all units struggled with these issues at least some of the time. Acadians were not bad soldiers; indeed, the willingness of so many men to volunteer for a national battalion even as enlistment rates fell across the country and despite institutional barriers and prejudices against French-Canadians should be seen as remarkable. Acadians from the

\(^{45}\) 5 District, Routine Orders of the Canadian Forestry Corps, RG9-III-D-3, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).
165th Battalion as well as from other units fought alongside other Canadians on all of the major battlefields of France and Belgium. Those who cut wood with the Canadian Forestry Corps also made an important contribution to the Allied victory. The intent of this article is not to detract from the significance of this service. Instead, further study of desertion offers the opportunity to better understand the history of Canada’s war effort, from the motivations of recruits to the functioning of the military chain of command, from the role of propaganda and shifting public opinion to the challenges of transitioning back to civilian life. What is more, the growing problem of reduced enrolments and increased desertion in the units created during 1916 directly contributed to the eventual decision to adopt conscription, a topic that has received much more attention from historians and an event with obvious implications for minority groups and French-Canadians across Canada. Acadians generally supported the war, but they were adamantly opposed to conscription.\textsuperscript{46} This article started with a reference to the increasing interest of historians in the experiences of ordinary people touched by the war. Deserters may not receive the same type of commemoration as veterans who fought overseas, but they were nevertheless swept up by the war as well, making decisions to enlist and to leave with profound implications for the rest of their lives. These are people worth knowing. Desertion and deserters should not be ignored in the study of Canada’s First World War.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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\textsuperscript{46} Theobald, *The Bitter Harvest of War*, 65.