

Black war veterans finally receiving recognition

By RON FANFAIR

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From Private Jeremiah Jones who single-handedly captured a German machine gun nest and its crew during the 1917 battle for Vimy Ridge in France, to Corporal Ainsworth Dyer who was killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan eight years ago, Blacks have valiantly fought and given their lives for Canada on the battlefields.

To mark Remembrance Day last Thursday, ceremonies to celebrate African-Canadian War Veterans and the sacrifices Black soldiers have made for Canada were held at the Trane Studio and at Queen's Park. Victorious Legacy organized an event at the Trane Studio attended by a few civilians and Canadian Armed Forces chief warrant officer Kevin Junor who failed by 10 votes in a recount to become Caledon's Ward Five councillor in last month's municipal elections.

"We often hear about 'Lest We Forget' when we celebrate Remembrance Day, but we can't forget what many of us do not know," said Junor, who last year became the first Black officer from the Toronto Scottish Regiment to receive the Order of Military Merit for meritorious service and devotion to the Army. "As a people, it's important that we learn about the rich history of Blacks in the Canadian Military. "I knew Cpl. Dyer who died in the line of duty and I have friends who have served and are doing duty in Afghanistan."

Retired Sgt. Major Oswald Reece, who plucked Dyer from Regent Park and successfully encouraged him to join the Army, said the recognition of African-Canadian veterans is long overdue. "It's about time," said Reece who retired two years ago after 32 years service. Born to Jamaican parents, Dyer and three colleagues were the first Canadian soldiers killed in combat since the Korean War that ended in 1953. Jamaican-born Canadian Olympian Private Mark Graham, who was also killed by friendly fire in September 2006, is among the 152 Canadian Forces casualties in Afghanistan since 2002.

"All of our veterans have earned our undying respect for the legacy they have left us," Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in a message to the Victorious Legacy organizers. "The legacy is found in the Canada they helped to build and protect, a country that cherishes freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Black Canadians may take distinct pride in their service to our country as they have a long and honourable tradition of patriotism, sacrifice and heroism." Defence Minister Peter MacKay noted the contributions of African-Canadians in uniform are myriad and significant. "We are fortunate that in modern times, there has been increasing recognition of the efforts these men and women have made in Canada's name," he said. "That history of service extends from before Confederation right up to the present day...Their efforts will not be forgotten."

The Ontario Black History Society paid tribute to the No. 2 Construction Battalion, the only All-Black expeditionary force in Canada's military history. Captain William White, the first Black to graduate from Acadia University, spearheaded the battalion's formation and became its chaplain and the first Black in the British Empire to hold a commissioned rank. He kept a diary during his military service that became the subject of a film, Honour Before Glory, which was produced by his great nephew, Anthony Sherwood. "His diary was written with such passion, poetry and honesty that I was compelled to write the story," Sherwood has said. "It was a unique military story that had to be told on film." The history of Blacks in Canada's military is long, rich and significant. Blacks fought for Britain in the War of 1812 against the United States, stood firm against the Rebellions of 1837 in Upper and Lower Canada and the Fenian raids in 1866 and alongside other Canadians and this country's allies in Europe in the two world wars and the Korean War. After holding off the Germans at Vimy Ridge, an injured Jones took the surviving prisoners to the Allied Lines and handed them over to his commanding officer.

Last February he was posthumously recognized for his bravery 60 years after his death with the Canadian Forces Medallion for Distinguished Service. William Hall was the first Canadian sailor and just the third soldier in this country to receive the Victoria Cross - Canada's highest military decoration - for bravery during combat. Cpl. Marlene Clyde was one of the first Black women to serve in the Canadian Armed Forces, seaman Raymond Lawrence - who served from 1953-1986 - was the first Black chief petty officer and the first Black naval officer to receive the Order of Military Merit and chief warrant officers Cyril Clayton and James Fraser were the first Blacks to be appointed regimental sergeant majors of a Canadian base and a central area command organization respectively.