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Francophone Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1918

The Evidence

JEAN MARTIN

Abstract: Francophone enlistment during the First World War has been estimated in the past between 35,000 and 50,000, including the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the merchant marine. Information on the language spoken was not recorded at enlistment and those estimates were based on very cautious guesses only. We had suggested in a recent paper (Canadian Historical Review, vol. 96, no. 3) that this participation had been significantly higher, in part due to the contribution of Francophones from outside the province of Quebec. Information have now been extracted from enlistment sheets and one new B database, comprised of 10 percent of all enlistment papers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), allows to research and analyse personal data from a fairly large corpus of soldiers. This paper offers the first evidence that the actual number of Francophones who joined the CEF, either as volunteers or under the Military Service Act (MSA), most likely exceeded 70,000.

IN A RECENT ARTICLE, I demonstrated how the participation of Francophones in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) between 1914 and 1918 had been grossly underestimated.¹ This demonstration was based on evaluations of maximum potential enlistment of Anglophones in the province of Quebec and on the number of Francophones killed in France and Belgium, but I had no access at

¹ J. Martin, “La participation des francophones dans le Corps expéditionnaire canadien (1914–1919): il faut réviser à la hausse,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 96, no. 3, (September 2015), 405–423.

the time to a significant corpus of enlistment records. This gap was filled with the completion of the B database by a team of researchers at Guelph University. This database contains the information extracted from the enlistment sheets of all the soldiers whose name begins with the letter “B,” representing 10 percent of all the enlistees of the CEF.²

It is therefore now possible, for the first time, to present new figures based on hard evidence of enlistment in the CEF. Not only is the number of enlistees available, but we also know when and where they enlisted, what was their regimental number, their age, their address, the identity of their closest relatives, and more. This offers a lot of possibilities in terms of analysis and we will concentrate in this paper on the enlistment of Francophones. It will thereafter be possible to confirm and even exceed the figures produced by our previous evaluations.

HOW MANY FRANCOPHONES?

After eliminating duplicates, 10,894 Francophones were identified in the B database.³ There might be fewer, but there might also be more. There is no certain way to identify Francophones and it is quite possible that a few of the Francophones that were included did not actually speak French, but it is also undeniable that a significant number of true Francophones were overlooked.⁴ All things considered, this figure of 10,894 can be assumed to be fairly accurate and the following analysis will be based on this assumption.

Should we also assume, then, that those 10,894 represent only 10 percent of all the Francophones, and that this total should therefore verge on 110,000 for the entire CEF? Not quite. The initial B seems to be somewhat overrepresented among French names. Among the 2,706 Francophones who died in France and Belgium during the war, 392 had their name starting with “B,” for a proportion of

2 There are 63,798 enlistees with a name starting with a “B”, from a total of some 640,000 records held at Library and Archives Canada. The B database was built at Guelph University by a team led by Professor Kris Inwood (Department of History).

3 Several individuals enlisted more than once in the CEF. Only one for every of those multiple enlistments was counted.

4 On the question of Francophone identification, see Martin, “La participation des francophones dans la Corps expéditionnaire canadien.”

Source	Number of Francophones	Number of “B”s	Proportion of “B”s (percentage)	Total projected
Dead in France and Belgium	2,706	392	14.5	75,131
Sample of census sub-districts	8,151	1,137	14	77,814
Sample of the Canadian census	90,198	12,452	13.9	78,374

Table 1: Possible total of Francophone enlistees according to three different comparison sources.

14.5 percent.⁵ Another source of comparison is the 1911 Canadian census. In a dozen massively Francophone sub-districts taken from various areas in the province of Quebec, a proportion of 14 percent was found among the French-speaking population.⁶ We also have a sample of the nominal return for the 1911 census which contains 5 percent of the Canadian population (371,373 individuals).⁷ Among the 90,198 persons who declared French as their first language in this sample, 13.9 percent (12,452) had their last name beginning with a “B.” Based on those three comparisons, it can therefore be reasonably assumed that our 10,894 Francophone enlistees in the B database represent between 14 percent and 14.5 percent of all Francophone enlistees in the CEF, for a potential total ranging between 75,000 and 79,000.

5 On the Francophone dead in France and Belgium, see Jean Martin, *Un siècle d’oubli: les Canadiens et la Première Guerre mondiale (1914–2014)*, (Outremont, :Athéna éditions, 2014), 200–202.

6 The sub-districts were located in Hébertville (Chicoutimi county), Normandin (Chicoutimi), Notre-Dame-du-Portage (Kamouraska), Saint-Denis (Kamouraska), Deschambault (Portneuf), Saint-Jean-de-Neuveville (Portneuf), Varennes (Chambly-Verchères), Baie-Saint-Paul (Charlevoix), Saint-Ambroise (Joliette), Saint-Félix de Valois (Joliette), Montréal (Maisonneuve) and Sainte-Angele (Rouville). The proportion of “B”s varied greatly from one place to the other, between 7 percent and 26.5 percent, but the general average was 14.43 percent.

7 “Canadian Century Research Infrastructure/ Infrastructure de recherche sur le Canada au 20e siècle (CCRI/IRCS), in 2012 Sample of population for 1911,” available at: <http://ircs1911.cieq.ca/?-lang=EN> [accessed September 2015]

QUEBEC AND THE REST OF CANADA

We have already suggested that one of the main reasons for the grossly underestimated participation of Francophones in the CEF in the past is the significant contribution from Francophones outside of the province of Quebec. Half a million Francophones lived outside of the province of Quebec in 1914, of which at least 100,000 must have been eligible for enlistment in the CEF. It is more than reasonable to assume that a fair proportion of those 100,000 men joined the army before the war was over. Thirty-five percent of the Francophone enlistees in the B database enlisted in another province than Quebec (2,788 in 7,983); this compares almost exactly with the proportion observed in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) database.⁸ Only in Ontario, 202,442 persons of “French origin” were counted in 1911, including probably more than 46,500 males of military age.⁹ How many of those young Francophones joined the CEF?

We know the province of enlistment for 57,923 individuals (91 percent of the total of 63,798) in the B database, and we also know the total of enlistees in each province until 15 November 1918.¹⁰ We have therefore established the proportion of the 7,983 Francophones (73 percent of the total) with a known province of enlistment in the B database with the total of enlistments for each province. This proportion varies from 2.36 percent in British Columbia to 44.22 percent in Quebec. Applied to the total of enlistees in each province, those proportions would mean that only 38,934 of the 88,052 men who enlisted in Quebec were Francophones, but it would also mean that 6 percent of 242,655 men enlisted in the province of Ontario, or 14,534 men, were Francophones. A total of 31,632 Francophones would have thus enlisted outside of Quebec. This may seem high, but it represents

8 See Martin, “La participation des francophones dans la Corps expéditionnaire canadien.”

9 Instead of the usual information on the language spoken by the population, the Canadian census in 1911 only provided information on “ethnic origin”. Twenty-three percent of the 2.5 million population of Ontario in general were males of military age, for a possible total of 46,561 of French origin.

10 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), G.A.Q. 10-42, “Copy from H.Q. 64-1-24, vol. 22, Total enlistment C.E.F.,” no date. Those figures were also published in A. Fortescue Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914-1919. General Series vol. I. From the Outbreak of War to the Formation of the Canadian Corps, August 1914-September 1915* (Ottawa, Department National Defence, 1938), 47.

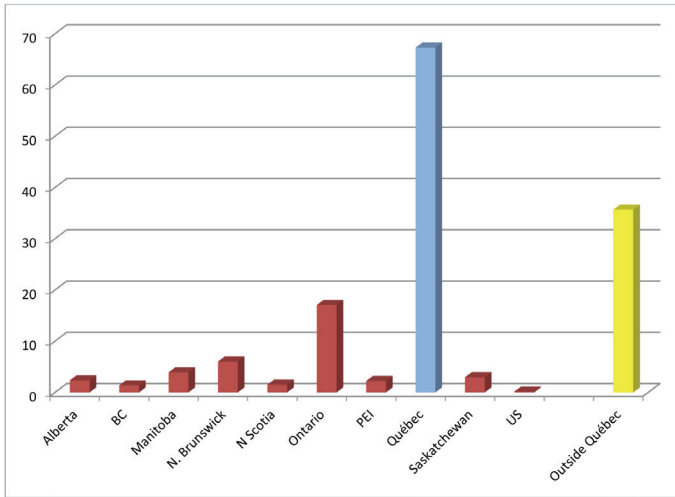


Figure 1: Enlistment of Francophones by province (percentage).

only between 2.36 percent and 19.82 percent (New Brunswick) of all the enlistees of those other provinces. In addition to the more than 46,000 Francophones available for enlistment in Ontario, it should also be remembered that large numbers of Quebecers enlisted in Ontario districts; and the same can be said of New Brunswick. And why would it seem so impossible that Saskatchewan can provide 2,575 Francophone recruits (6.17 percent of its total) when 23,251 persons declared to be of French origin in this province in 1911?¹¹ Nearly one third of the population was of the same origin in New Brunswick, and in every other province, this proportion was always higher than that of its contribution in Francophone soldiers.¹²

The total of Francophone enlistees according to this method of projecting the proportion of Bs on the total of each province would be 70,565, somewhat lower than with the simple projection of the 10,894 Francophones found in the B database. This can be explained

11 In just four CWGC cemeteries in France, for example, eight Francophones were found who had died while serving with the 46th Battalion, from South Saskatchewan. Three were born in Saskatchewan, two in Manitoba, two in Quebec and one in Ontario. All had voluntarily enlisted in Saskatchewan (five), Manitoba (one) and Ontario (two) between August 1915 and April 1916.

12 Only in British Columbia the proportion of French origin was slightly lower (2.27 percent) than that of the Francophone recruits (2.36 percent). The “anglicisation” of Francophones had barely begun in the early twentieth century, and the vast majority of the people of French origin, even if many of them had learned to speak English, could still be regarded as Francophone.

6 ∴ *Francophone Enlistment in the CEF*

	Francophones in "B" Database	Provincial Francophone Population (percent)	Provincial Total in "B" Database	Percentage of Francophones in Province	Total Enlistment by Province	Francophone enlistment based on percentage in "B" Database
Alberta	184	2.3	4142	4.44	48,885	2,172
British Columbia	109	1.37	4617	2.36	55,570	1,312
Manitoba	311	3.9	5802	5.36	66,240	3,551
New Brunswick	474	5.94	2391	19.82	27,061	5,365
Nova Scotia	118	1.48	2732	4.32	35,723	1,543
Ontario	1325	16.6	22122	5.99	242,655	14,534
Prince Edward Island	18	0.23	267	6.74	3,696	249
Québec	5195	65.08	11749	44.22	88,052	38,934
Saskatchewan	235	2.94	3809	6.17	41,689	2,572
US	14	0.18	292	4.79	6,986	335
Total	7983		57923	13.78	616,557	70,565

Table 2: Francophone enlistees by province.

by the lowest number of Francophones whose province of enlistment is known than the general proportion in the database. It would seem, though, that the total number of Francophones who joined the CEF can now safely be estimated between 70,000 and 75,000, more than twice the number traditionally suggested. This can be contested only if someone can demonstrate that an important proportion of the individuals identified as Francophones in the B database are actually Anglophones. Until this can be done, it should be assumed that the figures presented in this paper are valid.

CONSCRIPTION

One good indication of the validity of those figures is the significantly higher proportion of conscripts among the Francophones identified in the B database. Although it is quite difficult to clearly differentiate conscripts from the other enlistees, it seems that over 50 percent of the Francophones were conscripts while only 20 percent of the whole corps joined under the Military Service Act (MSA). Two different methods were used to try to differentiate conscripts from the others: first, the regimental numbers in the 3,000,000 and 4,000,000 series; second, the type of form used at enlistment. We know that regimental numbers in the 3,000,000 and 4,000,000 series were generally reserved for conscripts, but we also know that this was by no means exclusive and that conscripts were also given numbers outside those two series sometimes. Fortunately, the compilers of the B database also recorded the type of form that was used at enlistment and there is one form that is specifically designed for the

registration of conscripts. This so-called form D was not used in the same proportion as the 3,000,000 and 4,000,000 serial numbers.

Based on the regimental numbers in the B database, 53 percent of the Francophone soldiers would have been conscripts. This proportion is slightly reduced to 51.85 percent when we rather use the form D as a criterion. The disproportion is not the same in all provinces. The proportion of 3,000,000 and 4,000,000 serial numbers is generally higher than that of form D in the eastern provinces, but it is significantly lower west of Ontario, except in Alberta where it is almost equal. In Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia, the proportion of soldiers in the 3,000,000 and 4,000,000 series is less than 45 percent that of the forms D, which seems to indicate that much more conscripts were given numbers outside those series in those three provinces. On the other hand, volunteers seem to have more often received numbers in those series in the two provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

The highest proportions of conscripts (based on the form D) in general can be found in Prince Edward Island (36.7 percent), Quebec (31.4 percent), and New Brunswick (30.3 percent); British Columbia has the lowest proportion at 14 percent. Those proportions are significantly higher than those stated in the official reports, but rank roughly in the same order, except for New Brunswick which shows a higher proportion (30.3 percent) than Saskatchewan (28.5 percent); those positions are reversed in the official figures.¹³ Among Francophones, the highest proportion of conscripts can be found in Saskatchewan (58.7 percent), followed closely by Quebec at 56.8 percent. British Columbia, again, shows the lowest proportion with 27.3 percent. Except for Saskatchewan, then, the proportion of conscripts seems to have been higher in those provinces with large concentrations of Francophones, like Quebec and New Brunswick. Peer pressure probably played a significant part in the sense of voluntary enlistment or not in different linguistic environments.

Now, another indication of the validity of the data contained in the B database as an effective sample for the study of the whole CEF is this general proportion of about 20 percent conscripts (19.43 percent based on the regimental number, 21.88 percent based on the

13 See LAC, G.A.Q. 10-42, "Copy from H.Q. 64-1-24, vol. 22, Total enlistment C.E.F.," no date.

Province	Proportion of conscripts (percent)	Conscripts in the 3M and 4M series (percent)
Alberta	48.4	96.56
British Columbia	27.27	30.28
Manitoba	40.26	59.91
New Brunswick	51.24	104.57
Nova Scotia	46.72	107.02
Ontario	37.93	102.67
Prince Edward Island	33.33	100
Québec	56.75	107.7
Saskatchewan	58.65	37
Canada	51.85	102.22

Table 3: Conscription among Francophones by province based on form D.

form D) found in the database. The official history of the First World War establishes that 124,588 men were “taken on strength (by the Canadian Expeditionary Force” under the Military Service Act.¹⁴ This is 20.1 percent of the total of 619,636 men taken on strength in the CEF during the war. This number includes 24,937 men released before the end of the war, though, bringing the total down to 99,651 on 11 November 1918. Nearly 48,000 (38.13 percent of the total) conscripts were sent overseas and at least 24,000 (19.37 percent) reached the western front.

Francophones represented at least one third of all the conscripts (33.87 percent based on the regimental number, 37.39 percent based on the form D), which leads to suggest that probably 8,000 of them reached the front before the end of the war. But half of the Francophones were volunteers and about 75 percent of the volunteers were sent overseas in general.¹⁵ If the same proportion of Francophones were sent overseas, probably more than 25,000 Francophone volunteers would have reached the front. Added to the 8,000 conscripts, this brings the total of Francophone soldiers who spent time on the western

14 G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War. Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919* (Ottawa, Department of National Defence, 1962), 51, Appendix E, “The results of the Military Service Act.”

15 A total of 495,138 volunteers enlisted in the CEF (619,636 minus 124,588 conscripts) and 377,080 (424,589 minus 47,509 conscripts) of them were sent overseas, for a proportion of 76.16 percent volunteers sent overseas.

front around 33,000. This is almost equivalent to two full infantry divisions, far from an insignificant contribution. Francophones may have represented less than 10 percent of all the Canadian soldiers on the western front, yet they accounted for nearly 17 percent of those who were born in Canada, which was the case for the vast majority of Canadian Francophones.

A GLIMPSE AT THE REST OF THE ALPHABET

But, one could wonder, what if the “B”s are not really typical and should rather be regarded as an exception? Although it is difficult to establish on what basis this could be, there is still a slight possibility that Francophones with different initials might have enlisted in different proportions. Quebec’s *Institut de la statistique* published a list of the 1,000 most common family names in the province of Quebec, with their respective proportion in the general population of the province.¹⁶ I took fifty of the fifty-five most common names in that list, from Tremblay to Beaudoin, representing altogether 17.45 percent of the population.¹⁷ On Library and Archives Canada’s (LAC) website, a search was made for enlistment records with every one of those fifty names. Between 130 (Savard) and 770 (Leblanc) enlistees were found for each one of those names, for a total of 13,914 men. Allowing for a possible variation in the proportions due to immigration after the First World War, it might be surmised that those fifty names represented perhaps as much as 20 percent of the Francophone population in 1914, assuming a decline of nearly 15 percent in their occurrence. This would mean that a total of nearly 70,000 men with French family names would probably have enlisted in the CEF. Actually, those same fifty family names accounted for only 16.43 percent of the 89,761 individuals identified as Francophones in the 5 percent sample of the 1911 census return (see note 7), which

16 “Les 1 000 premiers noms de famille selon le rang, Québec.” Available at: http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/population-demographie/caracteristiques/noms_famille_1000.htm, [accessed November 2015]

17 Five names were left out for their similarity with English family names: Côté, Roy, Martin, Richard and Hébert.

would bring the projected total of Francophones in the CEF to nearly 85,000.

Yet Francophones in the CEF did not all bear typically French names. Names like Harvey, Martin, or Blackburn were quite common in some French-speaking areas, and there are many examples of anglicised names with soldiers serving with English-speaking units. How many Leblanc changed their name to White, Boulanger to Baker, Laforest to Forest or Hamel to Hammil? Wilfrid Boyer (killed in May 1918), for example, simply served as Fred Boya; Oscar Desrosiers (killed in October 1918) enlisted as Oscar Miller at Niagara in August 1915; and Alex Daunais (killed in September 1916) had his name transformed into Doena while serving with the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles. And those are just a few examples found in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records. It is impossible to know how many Francophones served disguised as Anglophones, but there were certainly several thousands who cannot be identified with a distinctly French name, and the number of 70,000 can therefore only be regarded as a minimum, be it when we use the B database or otherwise.

CONCLUSION

It is no longer possible to argue that no more than 35,000 or 50,000 Francophones joined the CEF in the First World War. All our evaluations show that their contribution would rather number between 60,000 and 80,000. The B database is the first sample large enough and with complete and reliable data for a valid analysis of the full composition of the CEF. For the first time, we have a good idea of the number of Francophones who joined in each province, and it seems clear that a large proportion of them enlisted outside of the province of Quebec. We can now reasonably assume that the other provinces provided at least 30,000 Francophone recruits to the CEF, which admitting that only 44 percent of the 88,052 enlistees in the province of Quebec were Francophones, brings their total to more than 70,000. Of this total, probably more than 30,000 reached the western front before the end of the war.

Now, it was found elsewhere that at least 3,000 Francophones died in France or Belgium during the war.¹⁸ This would represent between 9 percent and 10 percent of those who served in those two countries (see above). According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 52,452 members of the CEF lost their lives in France and Belgium, out of a total of about 400,000 who served there. This proportion of 13 percent is significantly higher than that of the Francophones, which could lead to believe that, as it was already suggested, French-Canadian soldiers more often tended to serve in line of communications units, far from the front. But it can also be that a significant number of Francophones arrived later on the front, and were therefore exposed for a shorter period of time to enemy fire. Yet it must also be remembered that those figures of the men who served and those who died do not come from the same source, and it is quite possible that a number of Francophones substantially higher than 3,000 actually died in France and Belgium.¹⁹

Why, then, were all the evaluations so unduly low in the past? Because the participation of Francophones had never been officially recorded and because it was generally assumed that most of the Francophones had to come from the province of Quebec, with only an insignificant contribution from the rest of the country. Somewhat unconsciously, English-Canadian historiography convinced itself that it was natural that French-Canadians show no great support for the war effort of the British Empire, while French-speaking historians eagerly adopted the idea that Quebecers rejected participation in the war because of their innate pacifism. There are two important flaws in those explanations. First, French-Canadians were not all living in the province of Quebec and second, Quebecers, apart from a limited number of intellectuals, were not more specifically pacifists than many other societies. It is undeniable that the almost exclusively

18 See J. Martin, "La participation des francophones dans la Corps expéditionnaire canadien," 416.

19 The Francophones who served were identified at enlistment and we know that a certain number of them had their name anglicised before they died, which prevented them from being identified as Francophone in the CWGC database. The count that was made in the CWGC records was also more restrictive, owing to the lack of information (name of relatives, place of residence, etc.) to support their identification as Francophone. Only when the CWGC database is linked up with the B database will it be possible to determine the real number of those who died.

Anglophone character of the Canadian Expeditionary Force deterred a large proportion of Francophones to enlist, but when they had a chance, a lot of them did join, and many more met up later with those volunteers in the trenches after being drafted under the Military Service Act. Thousands of those Canadian Francophones fought alongside their Anglophone counterparts, and thousands of them lie today in the cemeteries of northern France and Belgium.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean Martin is a Historian at the Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH) of the Department of National Defence, in Ottawa since 2000, Jean Martin carried out research on various topics, but he is now primarily interested in the history of the First World War and of Canadian Peacekeeping during the Cold War. He has been involved since 2010 in the training of the Canadian student-guides at the First World War battle sites of Vimy and Beaumont-Hamel in Northern France, and in this capacity, has made several extensive battlefield tours in Picardie and Nord-Pas de Calais. Jean Martin also published several articles in various books and journals and presented in many conferences in Canada as well as in the United States and in Europe, in the fields of Canadian history and military geography. He is currently pursuing research on the members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the First World War.

Recent publication: *Un siècle d'oubli: les Canadiens et la Première Guerre mondiale (1914–2014)* (Outremont, Athéna Éditions, 2014).

Historien à la Direction Histoire et patrimoine (DHP) du ministère de la Défense nationale, à Ottawa, depuis 2000, Jean Martin a mené des recherches sur divers sujets, mais il s'intéresse maintenant principalement à l'histoire de la Première Guerre mondiale et du maintien de la paix canadien pendant la guerre froide. Il a été engagé depuis 2010 dans la formation des guides-étudiants canadiens sur les sites de bataille de la Première Guerre mondiale à Vimy et Beaumont-Hamel, dans le Nord de la France et, à ce titre, a effectué plusieurs visites approfondies des champs de bataille en Picardie et dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Jean Martin a également publié plusieurs articles dans divers livres et revues, en plus de présenter dans de nombreuses conférences au Canada, aux États-Unis et en Europe, dans les domaines de l'histoire du Canada et de la géographie militaire. Il poursuit actuellement des recherches sur les membres du Corps expéditionnaire canadiens pendant la Première Guerre mondiale.

14 ∴ *Francophone Enlistment in the CEF*

