

Drunk and Disorderly in Vernon: The Court Martial of Fusilier Florent Labonte

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It was in 1944—five years into the Second World War—that Canadian manpower began to reach its limits. The management of manpower was difficult for all countries within the British Commonwealth, but for those with nonhomogeneous populations, like Canada and South Africa, it became necessary to weigh national priorities against international commitments.¹ For Canada, the demands of an expanded overseas role and the fact that conscription remained solely for home defence meant that there simply were not enough men to fill the replacement quotas. Having already expanded their accepted age range and health standard, officials were forced to consider their largest remaining source of men: the home defence conscripts.²

Fusilier (equivalent to private) Florent Labonte, a twenty-six-year-old French-Canadian, was conscripted into the Canadian Army under the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA) in December 1941. Thus, Fusilier Labonte had been on home service duty for almost three years when his regiment, the 1st Battalion of the Fusiliers du St. Laurent, was moved to the Vernon Military Camp in the late summer of 1944.³ The battalion had previously been in Alberta and coastal British Columbia (BC), before briefly being stationed in Vernon.⁴ Fusilier Labonte's time in Vernon was eventful, resulting in the first and only court martial of his army career. This brief microhistory speaks to the larger issues of conscription, language, and discipline within the Canadian Army during the Second World War.⁵

Conscription was a sensitive topic in Canada. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King was well aware of how the issue had almost

¹ Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 52–93, 367–372.

² For further discussion of the manpower shortage, see R. Daniel Pellerin, “Sharpening the Sabre: Canadian Infantry Combat Training During the Second World War,” *PhD Dissertation, University of Ottawa*, 2016; J. L. Granatstein and J. Mackay Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Rock's Mills Press, 2016); Daniel Byers, *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War* (UBC Press, 2016).

³ Florent Labonte, “District Court Martial: Labonte, F. D-61198. Pte. A/Sgt.,” File RG 150, Reel T-15671, Images 421–481, Library and Archives Canada, *Heritage Canadiana*, accessed February 1, 2024. https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_t15671/421.

⁴ Les Fusiliers du St-Laurent, “War Diary,” July–November 1944, File RG 24, Vol. 15068, Library and Archives Canada.

⁵ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigjártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2013), 4–5.

torn the nation apart in 1917, largely along linguistic lines.⁶ However, unlike in the First World War, the possibility of conscription did not cause immediate upheaval in the Second World War. Instead, tension slowly simmered between the NRMA conscripts, civilians, and General Service soldiers. The conscripts became known as “Zombies” and were accused of being ‘soft’ and unpatriotic.⁷ In the interior of BC—where this microhistory takes place—responses to the debate over conscription were public and vocal, creating an unwelcoming atmosphere for conscripts. The Mayor of Vernon, who also chaired the local branch of the Legion, publicly announced the city’s endorsement of conscription for overseas service.⁸

Hoping to avoid polarizing the nation by enacting full overseas conscription, the Liberal government began a forceful campaign to *encourage* conscripts to “go active” and switch their contract to General Service in the spring of 1944.⁹ The main theatre of this campaign was Pacific Command (BC and Yukon), where the majority of conscript units were stationed. Since 1942, the Vernon Military Camp, located in the interior of BC, had hosted various infantry brigades alongside its basic training centre, Battle Drill School, and the Canadian School of Infantry.¹⁰ In the spring of 1944 it was the 13th Canadian Infantry Brigade (CIB), which was largely composed of conscripts. They had recently returned from Kiska, Alaska, where collective morale had been high. Officers had heard from their men that they would be willing to “go active” if they could be guaranteed that the unit would remain intact. The decision was made to capitalize on these factors and use the 13th CIB as the starting point for the vigorous recruiting campaign in Pacific Command.¹¹

The campaign saw strong initial results, with 150 men signing up for active service in the first two days, but numbers soon dwindled to only a few per day and it was realized that they would never achieve one-hundred percent recruitment. In a desperate effort to reverse this trend, those conscripts most opposed to overseas service were transferred out of the brigade to prevent them from influencing their comrades.¹² The most significant move came on April 10 when a “Tent Camp” was erected on the outskirts of the camp. In an effort to use a degree of coercion, conscripts who refused to “go active” were put through a number of “route marches, assault courses, and night training schemes, as well as six inches of mud

⁶ Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*.

⁷ Byers, *Zombie Army*, 43–44.

⁸ “Vernon Endorses Sending Home Defence Men O/S,” *The Vernon News*, November 23, 1944; Byers, *Zombie Army*, 200.

⁹ Byers, *Zombie Army*, 178.

¹⁰ Megan Hamilton, “The Vernon Military Camp and the Imperial Training Archipelago, 1939–45,” *Canadian Military History* 33, no. 1 (2024).

¹¹ Byers, *Zombie Army*, 198.

¹² Byers, *Zombie Army*, 199.

that could hold its own against the Kiska variety.”¹³ Any pending requests for leave were denied, in addition to conducting individual interviews with the men and subjecting them to speeches from three Victoria Cross winners. The result of the whole endeavour was inadequate. By the end of April, less than a third of conscripts from the 13th CIB had switched to General Service; nowhere near the one-hundred percent rate that officials had hoped for. Across the nation, the recruitment campaign had seen relative success, with more inductees to active service between July and September than in the same months of 1943.¹⁴ However, it was not enough to fill the overseas shortages and the problem was only to get worse.

The Fusiliers du St. Laurent and Fusilier Labonte arrived in Vernon several months after the main thrust of the recruitment campaign had ended, but conscripts remained under pressure to “go active.” Such efforts finally worked on Fusilier Labonte, as he agreed to change his contract to General Service and head overseas. As a reward, he was promised a furlough to visit his family in Quebec. Fusilier Labonte and two of his regimental comrades were to leave from the Vernon train station on the evening of October 6, 1944, for their cross-country journey. However, the day before their departure Fusilier Labonte received a telegram that cancelled his furlough and ordered him to follow the Fusiliers du St. Laurent to Terrace, many hours north of Vernon. Regardless of the change in plans, the three men felt that their parting deserved celebration. The trio headed down the hill and into town to visit the local liquor store on the morning of October 6, where they each purchased a twenty-six-ounce bottle of liquor. Hitching a ride back up to the camp, the men began to pack their belongings and enjoy their recent purchases.¹⁵ The situation quickly got out of hand.

For a man that testified to rarely consuming alcohol, Fusilier Labonte certainly surpassed his limit that day. Between about 11:00 am and 5pm, he finished his twenty-six-ounce bottle. While he did attend the noon meal parade, as well as head back into town to confirm his train ticket, he unsurprisingly remembers little of what happened after 2:00 pm. The real trouble began at 5:00 pm. Although the details could only be pieced together based on a post-action assessment of his quarters, it seems that Fusilier Labonte became violent, damaging a door, a window, a chair, and a pillow, which resulted in a cut under his arm and a sprained thumb. Somehow, he came to only be wearing his underwear, with his trousers hanging off of one leg. He then left his room in the sergeants’ quarters and proceeded to the parade square.¹⁶

¹³ Vernon Military Camp Headquarters, “War Diary,” April 10, 1944, File RG 24, Vol. 17332; Byers, *Zombie Army*, 199.

¹⁴ Pellerin, “Sharpening the Sabre,” 343–355.

¹⁵ Labonte, “District Court Martial,” Images 421–481.

¹⁶ Labonte, “District Court Martial,” Images 421–481.

There, a draft was being conducted by Lieutenant L.T. Frost. Fusilier Labonte marched up to Lieutenant Frost while speaking French and began throwing sloppy punches, which missed their target. Due to the public nature of the space, orderly officers quickly descended upon the ordeal and placed Fusilier Labonte under arrest. While the orderlies were conversing with Lieutenant Frost on the series of events, Fusilier Labonte was able to slip free and land a solid blow to his superior's left cheek. The orderlies rapidly got the situation under control, but it was not long before Fusilier Labonte squatted on the ground and refused to proceed. With some force, they finally convinced him to continue to the orderly room, but only after stripping him of his trousers so that he could walk properly. Once inside, Fusilier Labonte was given a cigarette and ordered to dress. While doing so, he babbled in both French and English about tracer bullets being fired.¹⁷ However, Fusilier Labonte's violent episode had come to an end.

Fusilier Labonte did proceed to Terrace with his unit, but he remained under close arrest. Upon arrival, he was kept in detention until his court martial hearing on October 30. There were four charges laid against him, of which he only pleaded guilty to the second: striking a superior officer while on active service, drunkenness, failure to follow good order and military discipline, and willfully damaging public property.¹⁸ Interestingly, the court only found Fusilier Labonte guilty of drunkenness and willfully damaging public property, sentencing him to 120 days detention, a reduction in rank, and 126 days without pay. He served part of his sentence in Terrace, during which his regiment helped to initiate the Terrace Mutiny in response to the federal Cabinet's decision to authorize 'full' conscription in Canada.¹⁹ The disgraced battalion then proceeded to Valcartier, Quebec, in mid-December, with their convicts in tow. Fusilier Labonte's sentence was remitted on December 18 due to his good behaviour and the unit's upcoming deployment overseas.²⁰ They departed from Halifax in early January 1945, only to be disbanded in the United Kingdom to provide reinforcements for other Canadian formations fighting in mainland Europe.²¹

The story of Fusilier Labonte's court martial is a microhistory that speaks to wider Canadian issues. As previously mentioned, Fusilier Labonte was conscripted into the army through the federal government's

¹⁷ Labonte, "District Court Martial," Images 421–481.

¹⁸ Labonte, "District Court Martial," Images 421–481.

¹⁹ Reginald H. Roy, "From the Darker Side of Canadian Military History: Mutiny in the Mountains – The Terrace Incident," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1976), 42–55; Peter A. Russell, "BC's 1944 'Zombie' Protests Against Overseas Conscription," *BC Studies* 122 (1999), 49–76.

²⁰ Labonte, "District Court Martial," Images 421–481.

²¹ "Les Fusiliers du St-Laurent," *Infantry Regiments, Directorate of History and Heritage*, updated 20 November 2018,

<https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/themes/defence/caf/militaryhistory/dhh/documents/1ineages/fsl.pdf>.

National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA). Brought into law in June 1940, the NRMA created the necessary groundwork for men to be conscripted in defence of Canadian territory. Conscription was a deeply polarizing issue for Canadians and has been discussed by historians such as J.L. Granatstein, J. Mackay Hitsman, and Daniel Byers.²² Fusilier Labonte had been a part of the NRMA system for almost three years at the time of his incident. He must have survived the war, as his personnel record remains closed to the public. In such a case, historians must rely heavily on the individual's court martial record. However, it is clear enough that Fusilier Labonte was not a troublesome fellow. He had earned his way up to the rank of acting sergeant and had no previous infractions; facts that aided in his sentence being remitted.²³ While it took him almost three years to sign up for overseas service, he was not an overly problematic soldier. Regardless, the fact that he was a French–Canadian soldier would not have been in his favour while going through the disciplinary system. Divisions between English–speaking and French–speaking Canadians fuelled tensions over conscription. Some assumed that all “Zombies” were French–Canadian due to Quebec’s aversion to conscription. The truth was that approximately a third of conscripts were French–Canadian, a third English Canadian, and the last third were largely recent immigrants from mainland Europe.²⁴

This case study also brings to light the issue of language. The Vernon Military Camp was a predominantly English–speaking camp situated amongst a predominantly English–speaking civilian population, making the French–speaking units stationed there stick out sorely and likely feel alienated. Seeing as the Fusiliers du St. Laurent were a French–speaking unit out of Montreal, Fusilier Labonte could function within his unit with little knowledge of English. He testified at his trial to speak no English and understand very little, so an interpreter was used.²⁵ The Canadian Army had conducted trials in French as early as 1940, however, it depended on who was available to conduct the proceedings and where it was taking place. Terrace lacked such resources in October 1944. Fusilier Labonte’s language skills also became a topic for discussion during the court proceedings. None of the other officers involved in the incident spoke French, which did not benefit their assessment of the accused. However, contrary to Fusilier Labonte’s statement, several witnesses claimed that he could speak some English; at least enough to ask for a cigarette and mumble about tracer bullets after his arrest. One even stated that he was “positive that Sgt Labonte can speak some English.”²⁶ Despite this clear

²² Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*; Byers, *Zombie Army*.

²³ Labonte, “District Court Martial,” Images 421–481.

²⁴ Byers, *Zombie Army*, 125.

²⁵ Labonte, “District Court Martial,” Images 421–481.

²⁶ Labonte, “District Court Martial,” Images 421–481.

inconsistency with Fusilier Labonte's testimony, those proceeding over the trial did not seem concerned and it went without further consideration.

Wider discussions of alcohol consumption in the military are pertinent to Fusilier Labonte's situation. Although rationed, alcohol was a common part of a soldier's wartime experience and often the reason that many got into various kinds of trouble. Efforts to provide alternative forms of recreation were a topic of discussion for Canadian soldiers in all theatres of war and the NRMA men were no exception. Long periods of training and defence duties on the home front often led to boredom, and many conscripts turned to drink as a form of entertainment.²⁷ Earlier in the war, when NRMA men were only conscripted for thirty-day training periods, all training centres had been 'dry' establishments. Nonetheless, this did not stop men from finding other sources of liquor, as one officer at the Vernon Military Camp witnessed in November 1940:

*The majority of the recruits trained in our first course drank liquor in one form or another, frequenting the beer parlours in Vernon and adjacent towns and villages. At times they became a trifle noisy and boisterous, arriving back in camp somewhat 'under the weather.'*²⁸

Across the country, a widespread trend of soldiers being 'absent without leave' (AWOL) and the discovery of empty liquor bottles within the barracks led officers to recommend that a 'wet' canteen be established within each camp so that men could drink in a supervised environment.²⁹ Regardless of such facilities, Fusilier Labonte and his two comrades decided to drink on their own terms by going into town to buy the liquor and then drinking it while doing other tasks. Perhaps their upcoming departure had emboldened them to flaunt the rules so openly.

In addition to the wider themes of conscription, language, and discipline that have been discussed, what conclusions can be drawn from this microhistory? Largely, that the seemingly simple line between 'good' and 'bad' soldiers is actually blurry, unsettled by the complexity of human nature. Fusilier Labonte had no previous infractions, and this seemed to be a one-time occurrence. Based on the available evidence, it was his choice to drink heavily was his biggest fault, but surrounding circumstances likely also played a role. Historians, particularly Matthew Barrett, have begun the process of analysing the vast number of Canadian court martial records.³⁰

²⁷ Jeffrey Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (UBC Press, 2000), 130–133.

²⁸ Quoted in Byers, *Zombie Army*, 153.

²⁹ Byers, *Zombie Army*, 153.

³⁰ Matthew Barrett, *Scandalous Conduct: Canadian Officer Courts Martial, 1914–45* (UBC Press, 2022). The vast collection of Canadian Army court martial records is digitally available on Heritage Canadiana, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_140678.

Some men were repeat offenders, while others, like Fusilier Labonte, faced the consequences from one poor decision. Further research on the Canadian experience of military discipline in the Second World War will allow further conclusions to be drawn. To close with a broad assumption, Fusilier Labonte was a French–Canadian conscript who did not want to go overseas. When he finally was convinced to “go active”, the change in circumstance led to a poor decision being made. Such microhistories highlight the individual circumstances behind the court martial records.

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