

# Halifax's unsung wartime heroes: the Home Guard

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The Civil Emergency Corps was a civilian defence force formed during the Second World War to provide police, fire, health, relief, first aid, rescue squads, demolition squads, water repair, emergency clothing, and transport. Commonly known as The Home Guard, African Nova Scotian men and women provided this service in north-end Halifax and throughout Nova Scotia. This photo of Home Guard Platoon 7E was taken in front of the Gerrish Street Hall in Halifax in July 1943.

They are patriots few remember, and little is recorded about them.

They are the dozens of black men and women responsible for protecting a big chunk of Halifax's core during the Second World War, when attacks from Canada's enemies were not only feared but expected.

Citizens with names such as Downey, Adams, Talbot and Johnson, residents of Creighton, Maynard, Gerrish and Cunard streets, no far from the naval shipyards, stepped up to watch and protect their neighbourhood from harm in the form of bombs, fire and crime, adversities usually handled by municipal police and fire departments.

Numbers in those organizations had become thin by October 1942 when the Halifax Civil Emergency Corps was formed. Many firefighters and police officers were serving overseas, and civilians were recruited to fulfil their duties, as well as act as "home guards" in the event of an air raid or other acts of military aggression.

By the end of 1943, the number of residents serving in the corps had swelled to 6,000.

It was well known that German submarines regularly lurked in waters close to Halifax Harbour, where they targeted military and supply vessels leaving the port.

Home Guard Platoon 7E was made up entirely of blacks, representing the population of what was then a predominantly black neighbourhood. Not far away, in Africville, was another civilian group of African-Nova Scotians who served in a similar capacity, said Craig Smith, a Halifax author, historian and RCMP sergeant, in an interview at the North Preston Community Centre.

The Home Guard was honoured in the Nova Scotia Mass Choir's annual tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Dream Continues*, on Jan. 24 at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium in Halifax.

Choir member Rosella Fraser said that for the last 13 years, the organization has chosen a group of black Nova Scotians to feature in the event. They are people who have made important contributions to the province but whose stories have remained untold, she said.

"It is really important to tell these stories. These are contributions by African-Nova Scotians that no one really knows about. But they made a difference to the province."

Smith recalls how a July 1943 photograph of 19 members of Home Guard Platoon 7E sparked his desire to know more.

The group, including three women, wear hard hats and carry pumps and hoses. They wear white armbands and are dressed in their Sunday best for the photo. Some are seniors, and a few of the young men look to be still in their teens.

Recently, Smith tracked down one survivor, Constant (Connie) Chandler. Now in his 80s, Chandler is in ill health and was unable to be interviewed.

Home guard volunteers were trained on the Garrison Grounds by military personnel and were responsible for keeping a myriad of supplies on hand for emergencies, ranging from sandbags to firehoses, Smith said. In fact, according to the Nova Scotia Archives, there was a city bylaw passed in March 1942 making it compulsory for citizens to have a supply of sand and a shovel in case of an incendiary bomb attack.

Fraser said a typical patrol might include walking around neighbourhoods in darkness, carrying a flashlight, checking on residences and businesses, and not quite knowing what to find or who might be lurking in the darkness. Members were not armed.

"There were times when you wouldn't know whether an alarm was real or not."

Adding to the precariousness of the experience was the racism rampant in the city at the time. A black patrol could find itself under attack from other citizens, considering the attitudes among some whites.

"I think that would have been terrifying," Fraser said.

Both Smith and Fraser acknowledge that little is known about the day-to-day experience of African-Nova Scotians serving in the home guard.

The civilian groups were also responsible for water repair, emergency clothing, transport, communications and, on occasion, helping to bury the dead.

There is evidence that a similar wartime defence group existed in New Glasgow, Smith said, based on a brief conversation he had with Chandler recently and some information found in the Nova Scotia Archives. The archives also yielded lists of names of volunteers.

Those names are a starting point for compiling a more comprehensive background of who served in Home Guard Platoon 7E and their family members.

"We believe that delving into this period and learning about the service African-Nova Scotians provided during the war is important," Fraser said.

"It is important for racial harmony. Everybody had a part to play. It was a common experience no matter what race you were."

Smith noted that in the First World War, blacks were not even permitted to join military regiments and that only a few "who could pass as white" fought in the conflict.

The colour barrier had eased up by the Second World War, and local black families had members serving overseas, Smith said.

"This would have made a difference to those back home, and they would know how important it was to come out and volunteer for the (Civil Emergency Corps)."

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