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Civilian and Military Power (Newfoundland)

By [Melvin Baker](#)

A government-appointed civilian organization, the Newfoundland Patriotic Association (NPA), administered Newfoundland's war effort for three years under the leadership of Governor Sir Walter Davidson. Davidson consulted regularly with his Prime Minister, Sir Edward Morris, in all decision-making matters. Funding for the Association whose mandate it was to maintain the Newfoundland regiment, came from its own fund raising efforts as well as from the Newfoundland Legislature. In July 1917, Newfoundland politicians formed a unity coalition government and gave control of the war effort to the newly established Department of Militia. In 1918, Newfoundland adopted conscription to maintain personnel for the Regiment, whose ranks were severely depleted in several battles.

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1. Introduction

Newfoundland was one of five self-governing dominions in the British Empire when [Britain](#) declared war on [Germany](#) on 4 August 1914. Its population of over 242,000 was 98.6 percent native-born and was mainly of English and Irish origins, with small aboriginal populations located primarily on the

Island's south coast and in Labrador.^[1] The largest town, St. John's, located on the east coast of the Avalon Peninsula, had a population of over 32,000 and was the political, economic and financial centre. Much of the population, overwhelmingly employed in the fishery, lived in over 1,400 small communities located along Newfoundland's long, indented coastline, most with populations of 1,000 residents or less.^[2] Abundant cod fishing off its coasts was what brought Europeans to Newfoundland from the 16th century. Though a fledging timber industry was underway by 1914, and a railway had been built, the fishery remained the basis for its economic prosperity, with salt codfish exports shipped primarily to markets in Southern Europe and Brazil.^[3] The export of that fish was primarily in the hands of about twenty St. John's-based firms, whose owners were primarily Protestants in a country with a substantial Irish Roman Catholic minority, 32.9 percent overall in 1921,^[4] and almost 50 percent in the capital.

Self-governing since 1855, Newfoundland had a British parliamentary form of government consisting of a governor, an appointed legislative council and an elected assembly. In 1913, Sir [Walter Edward Davidson \(1859-1923\)](#) assumed the governorship of Newfoundland replacing Sir [Ralph Williams \(1848-1927\)](#) at a time of intense political partisanship. Williams in particular had endured the wrath in 1912 of the president of the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU), [William Coaker \(1871-1938\)](#), for favoring government members in controversial timber speculation scandals. Coaker, who had demanded that Williams be recalled, had formed the FPU in 1908 in predominantly Protestant areas along the northeast of the Island to push for social, economic and political reforms for fishers.^[5] The FPU challenged the decades-old dominance of rural Newfoundland by the St. John's elite. Coaker's opposition to the St. John's elite was further enraged over the loss of seventy-seven sealers from the S.S. Newfoundland in a horrific snow storm during the 1914 seal hunt. Prime Minister [Edward Morris \(1859-1935\)](#) - re-elected in 1913 with a sizeable Roman Catholic vote - refused Coaker's demand to have criminal charges laid against Captain [Abram Kean \(1855-1945\)](#), whom Coaker held responsible for the tragedy, further aggravating urban-rural tensions.^[6]

2. Mobilization

As Britain and Germany were moving towards war in early August, Davidson and Morris worried about the impact war might have on Newfoundland's economy and its submarine cable connections, and they were also concerned about the potential presence of German cruisers off the coast.^[7] In St. John's, as in Canada, the declaration of war was greeted with tremendous enthusiasm as thousands of citizens paraded "singing patriotic songs."^[8] In August 1914, Newfoundland had no standing military force.^[9] What the dominion had was a branch of the Royal Naval Reserve that had been in existence since 1902 and consisted of 600 reservists who trained on an old Admiralty vessel based in St. John's. Also at St. John's, there were four church-sponsored boys' cadet corps and a few branches of the adult-based Legion of Frontiersmen. Officers and soldiers for the first army battalion came overwhelmingly from these para-military groups.^[10]

Davidson moved quickly to prepare Newfoundland to help Britain. He drafted a telegram offering assistance, approved by the Morris Government on 7 August, and sent the following day to the Secretary of State. The offer would raise a naval force of 1,000 men by 31 October to serve abroad for one year with Newfoundland meeting all expenses. There was also a land force of 500 men to be raised within a month for service abroad. The [British Government](#) accepted the land force offer the following day, and on 14 August accepted the naval reserve proposal.^[11] During the course of the war, 11,988 male Newfoundlanders enlisted for overseas service, the majority being in the Newfoundland Regiment and lesser numbers from the Royal Naval Reserve and the Newfoundland Forestry Corps. Some 3,296, served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, while an unknown but much smaller number served in the American armed forces.^[12] In 1917, the Newfoundland Patriotic Association (NPA) recruited skilled woodsmen because of a shortage of such workers in Britain. Also, 494 men enlisted in the Newfoundland Forestry Corps, which served in logging operations in Scotland.^[13] Many middle and upper-class young women voluntarily served directly in a number of ways, especially in nursing units in the Canadian and British forces, primarily in the British Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). Other Newfoundland [nurses](#) worked as nurses' aides and ambulance drivers, and on hospital ships."^[14]

Davidson took the initiative in organizing the war effort to keep it unified, non-partisan and non-political. Having secured the support of the Roman Catholic Archbishop [Michael Howley \(1843-1914\)](#), Morris did not immediately convene the legislature to debate how a land force would be formed.^[15] An open public meeting at St. John's was held 12 August with 3,000 citizens in attendance and approving the appointment of a committee of prominent St. John's fifty-five citizens (with power to add to its number). This committee would have responsibility to raise and equip land and naval forces. Initially called the Patriotic Committee, it quickly became known as the NPA under Davidson's chairmanship, and from the start was St. John's-led. Half of the executive were Water Street merchants and the rest represented the major denominations and political parties. This committee in turn appointed committees and sub-committees with responsibility for recruitment, training, equipment, transport, officer selection, and finance. Committees were organized along denominational and political lines. On 18 August, a further 250 members, including Morris and the members of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council, were added to the executive committee. Other members were drawn from the St. John's clergy, labour organizations, major newspaper editors and physicians. Outport branches of the Association had local magistrates as chairs. To avoid partisanship, Davidson organized all the standing committees, which consisted of one government member and one opposition member. Decisions made by these committees were approved at a NPA general meeting. The NPA in turn forwarded its approval to Morris for his government's consent, and similarly to the leader of the opposition. On 7 September 1914, Morris convened the legislature to pass a War Measures Act (based on existing British and Canadian statutes) that gave the government authority through orders-in-council to manage the war effort directly or through a third party, which in this case was the NPA. While Morris never formally gave the NPA authority to conduct the war, in practice Davidson did so for nearly three years through the

NPA.^[16] The Newfoundland Government assumed responsibility for the pay of the members of the regiment, as well as all expenses associated with the regiment while they remained in Newfoundland. The Government also covered the costs of the regiment's transport to Britain, and committed to cover future pensions and allowances. This was financed through substantial government loan borrowing.^[17]

Coaker was an initial critic of the regimental approach, preferring instead that Newfoundland's contributions be included with recruits to the Naval Reserve or volunteers to the British and Canadian armed forces. This would avoid direct costs to Newfoundland Government for maintaining ground forces. He also regarded the NPA as a Morris government ruse intended to rehabilitate the Morris faction politically. Nonetheless, but from 1915 Coaker actively supported the NPA war effort and campaigned for volunteers for both land and naval forces.

The Governor's wife, [Margaret Fielding Davidson \(1871-1964\)](#), took the lead in organizing the Women's Patriotic Association on 31 August 1914. The WPA helped with fundraising efforts in general, for example, by knitting wool socks for volunteers overseas, a comfort much needed at the front. The WPA leadership after 1918 provided the core leadership for the local suffragist movement that successfully rallied support for the enfranchisement of women at the national level in 1925.^[18]

To look after Newfoundland's interests overseas, in September 1915 Davidson encouraged the formation in London of the Newfoundland War Contingent Association consisting of leading British citizens with Newfoundland connections. This association raised funds in England to cover its operations and had the "task of looking after the Newfoundland soldiers, sick or wounded, or on furlough, in any part of the British Isles, and of Newfoundland prisoners of war in enemy countries."^[19]

3. Recruiting and Manpower

The overwhelming number of army initial recruits came from St. John's, while the Naval Reserve had drawn on young fishers from the outports. The NPA had little influence over the naval force that was integrated within the Royal Navy and for which the British Government assumed financial responsibility. The first group of reservists left Newfoundland on 6 September 1914 to join Her Majesty's Canadian Ship (HMCS) Niobe, a Canadian cruiser charged to hunt for German vessels off Canada's east coast.^[20] While The NPA did have responsibility for recruitment, the promised number of 1,000 naval volunteers was not reached until March 1915.^[21] As regulation khaki serge material was then unavailable in St. John's, army recruits were first dressed in makeshift fatigues with blue serge puttees and white duck kitbags made locally. Following some initial training at a temporary camp in the city, the "Blue Puttees," as the first call for 500 recruits became known, left for England on 4 October aboard the Florizel, a steamer owned by one of Newfoundland's mercantile firms, the Bowring Brothers. The governor initially played the lead role in the selection of officers for the battalion of about 500, while following his prime minister's advice that he should make it appear

as though the NPA had led the selection process.

The NPA's St. John's-centred focus made it difficult to effectively recruit in the outports where young men stayed home with their family-based fishery operations. A February 1915 tour of the south coast by NPA members met strong resistance and occasional hostile crowds.^[22] The NPA remained a St. John's organization with very little influence in the outports, where young men were more interested in the family fisheries. Enlistment for the regiment slowed after the spring of 1915 as the NPA, discouraged by its south coast experience, reduced outport recruitment efforts.^[23] Recruitment for the naval reserve in the outports proved more receptive, especially in districts along the northeast coast where Coaker's FPU had strong support.^[24]

From the beginning, the NPA had involved itself in the selection of the officer corps and the promotion of men in the field as well as with the regiment's administration overseas. This meant that, eventually nearly all of the officers came from St. John's. Favouritism was rife in the selection process; the majority of the sons of prominent NPA members and the Protestant elite were commissioned.^[25]

Initially camped near the First Canadian Contingent at Aldershot in England in late 1914, the Newfoundlanders feared that such a close proximity to the Canadian contingent would lead to the impression that they were one and the same. This was a sensitive issue for the Newfoundlanders who were conscious of their Newfoundland national identification. In December, they were transferred to Fort George at Inverness in Scotland to continue their training. A second battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment left Newfoundland on 5 February 1915, and a third on 22 March, bringing the strength of the regiment to about 1,000 men.^[26] The regiment was sent to the Gallipoli front in October 1915 and suffered 647 casualties out of the 1,167 who served in Gallipoli. This paled in comparison to losses on the Somme on 1 July 1916.^[27] The Regiment attacked the Germans near the town of Beaumont Hamel; over 800 men went over the top with 233 men dying in the face of German machine guns, and another 477 men reported to be wounded or missing.^[28]

4. The End of Voluntarism

The NPA succeeded initially in keeping the war effort out of partisan politics, but by early 1917 its failure to recruit especially in the outports began to undermine its legitimacy and credibility,^[29] leading to public calls for its replacement by a government militia department. Public criticisms became most pronounced following the publication of several reports from a government-appointed commission charged with investigating the high cost of living. These reports indicated that business leaders within the NPA had profited from charging exorbitant rates for imported foodstuffs and other necessities of life that worsened living conditions for city labourers and residents generally. Profiteering was the one main concern Coaker had at the beginning of the war and one which he constantly attacked Morris for doing nothing about.^[30]

Morris, too, saw no need for the NPA's existence now that he had finally maneuvered the opposition in July 1917 into accepting a national government. A general election had been required by law to be held in 1917, one which the opposition felt confident it would win, but Morris circumvented that event by gaining British Government approval to extend the life of the existing elected assembly for an additional year. Coaker and the Liberals had made the formation of a militia department one of the conditions for an all-party government and the new government acted swiftly in this regard.^[31] The problems associated with voluntary enlistment became further compounded in the spring of 1917 by large regimental casualties at Monchy-le-Preux and later in the year at Poelcappelle and Cambrai. The number of new enlistees in 1917 did not keep pace with the casualty numbers, and the new department had no more success than the NPA in encouraging recruitment.^[32]

The survival of the Regiment and the need to find enough volunteers to maintain a substantial fighting force dominated the last year of the war for Newfoundland. While conscription became increasingly recognized as necessary to maintain the fighting strength of the regiment, in early 1917 the government, threatened by political unpopularity in the outports, re-emphasized the patriotic duty of Newfoundlanders to serve voluntarily.^[33] Maintaining the regiment at full force had also become a matter of great national pride and identity.^[34] On 1 July 1917, the NPA organized a memorial ceremony to commemorate the anniversary of Beaumont Hamel. The following year the government declared an annual statutory holiday for 1 July, hence Newfoundland's official day of remembrance.^[35] The formation of a National Government in July 1917 radically altered the domestic political landscape, as Coaker joined the new government as a minister without a portfolio. His emphasis in government, however, was to tackle a serious tonnage problem that was necessary in order to bring needed imported foodstuffs and coal to Newfoundland and to ship fish to market, a commodity that was in high demand at the time because the war had closed off trade from Norway and Iceland.

The National Government delayed any implementation of mandatory service as long as possible, but the British Government continued to pressure Newfoundland and the other dominions to provide more manpower. Prime Minister [William Lloyd \(1864-1937\)](#), who had succeeded Morris as Prime Minister in January 1918, enacted the Military Services Act on 11 May 1918. Supported by Coaker, who helped to lower resentment in the outports towards this measure, the Act established a military service board to enforce the Act and to hear arguments requesting exemptions from the Act. Out of the first group of conscripts (aged nineteen to thirty-five years) who were ordered to be registered by 24 May 1918, 1,573 were found fit for duty and were sent to Britain for training in September. This group did not go to the front until the Armistice was signed.^[36]

5. Conclusion

In April 1918, returned and disabled veterans in Newfoundland formed an association to lobby the government for improved pension and other benefits. They were joined a year later by returning

members of the regiment.^[37] The total number of casualties for the Newfoundland Regiment was 3,565, of which 1,251 were fatal.^[38] For the naval reserve, Newfoundland suffered 171 fatal casualties, who served on an array of British naval vessels.^[39] In 1914, Newfoundland had sought a non-partisan approach to organizing its war effort. Until 1917 the NPA, under Davidson's strong leadership, generally allowed the war effort to be managed above politics. The formation of a National Government in July 1917 saw this approach continue and enabled the government in 1918 to implement mandatory military service to meet the manpower demands of the Newfoundland Regiment. The war temporarily benefited Newfoundland because its fish secured higher than usual prices in the market, with both merchant and fishers prospering together. However, after 1918, the cost of Newfoundland's contribution to the war effort and the subsequent expenditures for veterans, led to a huge increase in the national debt. This was a contributing factor in the suspension of responsible government in 1934 when Newfoundland gave up its status as a self-governing dominion and accepted rule by a British-appointed commission government.^[40]

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Notes

1. ↑ O'Brien, Patricia Ruth: "The Newfoundland Patriotic Association: The Administration of the War Effort, 1914-1918" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University, 1981), p. 1.
2. ↑ Ibid., p. 9; and Handcock, W. Gordon: "Settlement," in Poole, Cyril F. and Cuff, Robert (eds.): *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. 5, St. John's 1994, p. 139.
3. ↑ For the impact of the war on the Newfoundland economy, see O'Brien, "Patriotic Association"; Cadigan, Sean: *Death on Two Fronts: National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914-24*, Toronto 2013; and Baker, Melvin: "Challenging the 'Merchants' Domain': William Coaker and the Price of Fish, 1908-1919," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 29/2 (2014), pp. 189-226.
4. ↑ *Newfoundland Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1935: Interim Report (1936)*, p. 9.
5. ↑ Baker, "William Ford Coaker, the Formative Years, 1871-1908," pp. 225-66; and McDonald, Ian D.H.: "To Each His Own": William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908-1923, St. John's 1987.
6. ↑ See Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts* 2013, pp. 32-92.
7. ↑ The Rooms Provincial Archives (RPA), GN1/10/0, Governor's Office – War Papers, reel #1, General, 1914, entries for 1 – 4 Aug. 1914.
8. ↑ O'Brien, Mike: "Out of a Clear Sky: The Mobilization of the Newfoundland Regiment, 1914-1915," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 22/2 (2007), p. 402; and Mackenzie, David: "Eastern Approaches: Maritime Canada and Newfoundland," in Mackenzie, David (ed.): *Canada and the First World War*, Toronto 2005, pp. 350-351.

9. ↑ O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," p. 403; and RPA, GN1/1/7, box 27, enclosure in Harris to Long, 2 Feb. 1918, P.T. McGrath, "Newfoundland's Part in the Great War," p. 7.
10. ↑ O'Brien, "Patriotic Association," pp. 27-29; O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," pp. 402-406.
11. ↑ RPA, GN1/1/7, box 27, enclosure in Harris to Long, 2 Feb. 1918, P.T. McGrath, "Newfoundland's Part in the Great War," pp. 2-4; and O'Brien, "Patriotic Association," pp. 33-34.
12. ↑ Sharpe, Christopher A.: "The 'Race of Honour': An Analysis of Enlistments and Casualties in the Armed Forces of Newfoundland: 1914-1918," *Newfoundland Studies*, vol. 4/1 (1988), pp. 27-28; Baker, Melvin: "Repatriated Newfoundlanders from the American Expeditionary Forces," *The Newfoundland Ancestor*, 30/3 (2014), pp. 98-101.
13. ↑ Sharpe, "The 'Race of Honour'"; McGrath, "Newfoundland's Part in the Great War," pp. 22-23. O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," p. 420.
14. ↑ See Bishop-Stirling, Terry: "'Such Sights One Will Never Forget': Newfoundland Women and Overseas Nursing in the First World War," in Glassford, Sarah and Shaw, Amy (eds.): *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War*, Vancouver and Toronto 2012, pp. 126-147.
15. ↑ O'Brien, "Patriotic Association," p. 35.
16. ↑ O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," p. 411.
17. ↑ *Ibid.*; and Mackenzie, "Eastern Approaches," p. 363.
18. ↑ Duley, Margot I.: "The Unquiet Knitters of Newfoundland: From Mothers of the Regiment to Mothers of the Nation," in Glassford and Shaw (eds.), *A Sisterhood of Suffering* 2012, pp. 51-74.
19. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 418, and O'Brien "Patriotic Association," pp. 93-95.
20. ↑ Parsons and Parsons, *The Best Small-Boat Seamen in the Navy: Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve, 1900-1922*, St. John's 2009, p. 31.
21. ↑ O'Brien, "Patriotic Association," pp. 100-104, 106, 110.
22. ↑ *Ibid.*, 112.
23. ↑ *Ibid.*, 116.
24. ↑ *Ibid.*, 111; and Martin, Chris: "The Right Course, the Best Course, the Only Course: Voluntary Recruitment in the Newfoundland Regiment, 1914-1918," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, . 24/1 (2009) pp. 55-89.
25. ↑ O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," pp. 417-418; and O'Brien, "Patriotic Association," pp. 188-190.
26. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-81; and O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," pp. 416-417.
27. ↑ Roberts, Edward (ed.): *A Blue Puttee, Sydney Frost: The Memoir of Captain Sydney Frost*, MC, St. John's 2014, p. 127.
28. ↑ Harding, Robert J.: "Glorious Tragedy: Newfoundland's Cultural Memory of the Attack at Beaumont Hamel, 1916-1925," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 21/1 (2006), p. 7.
29. ↑ O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," p. 420.
30. ↑ O'Brien, "Patriotic Association," p. 31. See also Baker, Melvin: "Log of the FPU: President Coaker's Story of his Trip to the North in 1914" in *The Newfoundland Ancestor*, 29/4 (2013), p. 148 where Coaker describes profiteering by merchants in the Bonavista and Catalina areas as war was about to be declared.
31. ↑ See *ibid.*, pp. 130 and 277-82.

32. ↑ Martin, "The Right Course," pp. 75, 80.
33. ↑ Ibid., pp. 71-72, 80.
34. ↑ Mackenzie, "Eastern Approaches," p. 352; and Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts* 2013, pp. ix-xvi.
35. ↑ Harding, "Glorious Tragedy," pp. 10-11.
36. ↑ Sharpe, "The 'Race of Honour'," p. 41; and O'Brien, "Patriotic Association," pp. 319-329.
37. ↑ Nicholson, G.W.L.: *The Fighting Newfoundlander: A History of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment*, St. John's 1964, pp. 506-508.
38. ↑ Cadigan, *Death on Two Fronts* 2013, p. xv. As Cadigan notes at p. 315, n.14, official and scholarly sources differ on the precise numbers.
39. ↑ Sharpe, "The 'Race of Honour'," pp. 45-47.
40. ↑ See Neary, Peter: *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949*, Kingston 1988.

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