



On April 27, the Louisiana State Bar Association's Francophone Section helped to sponsor an event at the National WWII Museum, "Cajun-Acadian WWII Commemoration: A Salute to French-Speaking Veterans." Photo by Frank Aymami, courtesy of The National WWII Museum.

FRENCHIES GO TO WAR:

Cajun-Acadian WWII Commemoration

By Warren A. Perrin and Jason P. Theriot, Ph.D.



On April 27, 2022, the Louisiana State Bar Association's Francophone Section helped to sponsor an event at the National WWII Museum, "Cajun-Acadian WWII Commemoration: A Salute to French-Speaking Veterans." Organized in collaboration with the National WWII Museum and the Consulate General of Canada, this event paid tribute to four French-speaking WWII veterans (three Cajuns and one Canadian) who served during WWII as interpreters and advisors because of their unique skill set.

By the time the United States entered World War II, the Cajuns of south Louisiana had begun to experience a transformation. Educational reforms, industrialization and the emerging oil industry caused major changes for the once-isolated, rural, French-speaking Cajuns. The Second World War accelerated the process of Americanization among the Cajuns and provided opportunities unavailable to previous generations of their people. Exposure to other cultures, skills acquired in the military and in the factories, and a chance at a college education at war's end provided the underpinnings for a more Americanized way of life in French Louisiana. Because of their traditional skills, the Cajuns of World War II proved to be well adapted to meet the wartime challenges in both military service and defense industries. The war experience justified their cultural differences. The Cajuns thus discovered their place in America but also emerged from the war with a newfound appreciation of their unique heritage.

Background

World War II represented a pivotal event in American history. By the 1940s, America's cultural, economic and political landscape had undergone a multitude of change as to drastically set itself apart from the previous decades — change that has endured into the 21st century. The Cajuns of south Louisiana, a unique American sub-group with strong ties to their French-Acadian heritage, rode this sea of change to post-war socioeconomic prosperity, merged with mainstream America, and yet still maintained much of their cultural resilience.

The story of the Cajuns in World War II is essentially a story about people and place, about communities in rural south Louisiana that held together in a time of crisis. It represents a shared memory of people immersed in their civic duties and military obligations. As history recalls, prior to the war, the Cajun people endured 300 years of sacrifice and heartache, being exiled from the homes in the Maritime Canada (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island) to a voluntary resettlement in the Louisiana Territory.

Acadian History in Brief

In 1604, an adventurous group of French colonists settled an area that became known as Acadia (today Nova Scotia, Canada), and, over the next 150 years, these hardy souls endured and flourished, creating an exceptional new Acadian culture in the process. They also developed an exceptional cohesiveness similar to a nationalistic identity that included the ideas of republicanism, independence and self-rule — strong-minded ideals that eventually became the focus of the American Revolution not long thereafter. But the Acadians fell under British control in 1713, and subsequently maintained a fractious relationship with their antagonists until 1755, when they were brutally erased from their homeland, deported, exiled, and made homeless by the decade-long land grab known as *le Grand Dérangement*, the Great Upheaval, or more simply, the



Speeches, interviews and recognition ceremonies were part of the National WWII Museum's event on April 27. Photo by Frank Aymami, courtesy of The National WWII Museum.

Deportation.

About one-third of the estimated 18,000 Acadians died from exposure, dehydration, starvation or drowning when the ships deporting them capsized. Meanwhile, their homes were burned and lands appropriated by the British and given to the 8,000 colonists known as the New England Planters, and to the British and Colonial American soldiers who carried out the Deportation that sent the deported Acadians down the Atlantic coast. A British effort to assimilate them into colonial society failed against stubborn Acadian resistance. Unknown to the Acadians themselves

at the time, such resistance was the first step in the creation of their new ethnicity in North America.

A hundred years before the Deportation, the Acadians were living in relative peace. Professor Amy H. Sturgis, Ph.D., author and scholar, noted that the Acadian Deportation was important for two reasons.

First, it was the first European state-sponsored ethnic cleansing on the continent of North America. Acadians had created much wealth, and the British simply came along and took what they wanted by brute force.

Secondly, the Acadian Deportation



Jason P. Theriot, author, historian and consultant, delivered remarks at the event. Photo by Frank Aymami, courtesy of The National WWII Museum.



Veteran Norris Morvant of Thibodaux, left, was interviewed by Jason P. Theriot during the National WWII Museum's event. Photo by Frank Aymami, courtesy of The National WWII Museum.

marked the end of a possible alternative history where there was cooperation between the Acadians and the Native Americans. As stated by Mi'kmaq Elder Daniel N. Paul, it is generally believed that early contacts between the Acadians and the Mi'kmaq quickly grew into a mutually beneficial relationship which paved the way for the French settlers to establish themselves in Acadia without Mi'kmaq opposition. The two peoples established many social exchanges, and inter-marriages were common. Mi'kmaq children attended schools alongside Acadian children. This was in stark contrast to the British treatment of Native Americans: the natives were regarded as a people fated for conquest — and genocide.

Acadians had an economy based upon “trade, not raid.” They understood they were on the border between two great powers, France and England, and took advantage by trading with both, thus becoming prosperous. Like the native Mi'kmaq, they came to recognize that they had very basic intrinsic rights, which they believed no government could take from them. According to Dr. John Mack Faragher, once neutrals, they became de facto revolutionaries ahead of their time. This small idea led to big ideas and paved the way for the American colonists to later declare independence from England in 1776. Acadians had become classical republicans: they were against any form

of tyranny, whether monarchic or democratic, and stood firmly upon concepts of individual rights and the sovereignty of the people.

The ethnic cleansing was successful in that little trace of the previous owners was left upon the lands that the British confiscated, but the mass elimination of an unwanted ethnic group did not result in the erasure of the owners themselves. The Deportation instead planted the seeds of many new Acadians in over 40 localities across several countries. Québec historian André-Carl Vachon estimates that 20 percent of the approximately 18,000 Acadians settled in Louisiana and 23 percent settled in the Province of Quebec after the Deportation. A group of 202 Acadians led by Joseph Beausoleil Broussard arrived in New Orleans, La., in 1765, and their descendants saw their post-dispersal culture and identity expand and evolve into today's iconic Cajun culture. This culture is a complex mélange of historical and societal traditions affected by the experiences of the diaspora as well as the influences of many other cultures that the Acadians came in contact with in south Louisiana — Native American, African, Anglo-American, German, Italian, Scots-Irish, Polish, Jewish, Hispanic, Slovak and Lebanese.

Clearly, the ethnic cleansing carried out against the Acadians by the British in the mid-18th century is still having ramifications in the 21st century.

In 1990, a “Petition for an Apology for the Acadian Deportation” was filed by your author (Perrin) against the British Crown, resulting in Queen Elizabeth II granting the Royal Proclamation on Dec. 9, 2003. Further, the proclamation designated the 28th day of July — the day the Deportation Order was signed — as an annual Day of Commemoration of the Acadian Deportation. Importantly, the proclamation, an act of contrition, declared a closure to the century-long debate as to whether the Deportation was justified, and a historical wrong was symbolically rectified.

From the late 18th century to the eve of Pearl Harbor, the Cajuns met the challenges that threatened their way of life in “New Acadia;” they often suffered severe poverty and harsh discrimination, but continued to adapt to changes, assimilating other cultures along the way, and creating a cultural heritage of their own.

Panel Discussion

The “Cajun-Acadian WWII Commemoration: A Salute to French-Speaking Veterans” highlighted the deep and meaningful relationship, and shared history, between Louisianan Cajuns and Canadian Acadians. United by their ability to speak French, American and Canadian veterans served shoulder to shoulder on foreign land, under different flags, but for a common cause. Thanks to their bilingual



Warren A. Perrin, chair of the Louisiana State Bar Association's Francophone Section, delivered remarks at the event. Photo by Frank Aymami, courtesy of The National WWII Museum.



Honoring the veterans at the National WWII Museum. Photo by Frank Aymami, courtesy of The National WWII Museum.

abilities, they assumed key roles, such as interpreters and translators, and contributed to the war effort in unique ways. The Cajun honorees were Norris Morvant of Thibodaux, La., Addy Melancon of Henderson, La., and Shirley Guidry of Lake Arthur, La. All of them related that they grew up being ashamed to speak French, but their war experience made them proud to be bilingual. It became a badge of honor to be called "Frenchie."

No two nations share a closer bond than the United States and Canada, bound by geography and borne out of a shared history and common values. During the Second World War, more than 160,000 French Canadians volunteered to serve in the three armed services, representing just over 20% of Canadians serving overseas. They came primarily from the provinces of Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edwards Island. United by their linguistic abilities, these brave men and women served with their Louisiana "cousins to the South," who spoke the same "Acadian French."

For over 150 years, Canada has been a friend and partner of the United States, protecting each other through the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) for more than 60 years. Together as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the countries have assisted in safeguarding Europe for seven decades. And united as allies, the countries' military landed

in Europe, championing the cause of freedom during World War II. Alphonse Vautour of Shediac, New Brunswick (Canada) was one of these men. His unit, made up of many French-speaking service members from the Beaubassin area, landed on Juno Beach on D-Day. Sadly, he died at age 102, just two weeks prior to the April 27 event. Vautour's video account of his time during WWII was played at the event, which had been previously recorded by Jean-Robert Frigault, a historian from New Brunswick, Canada.

Conclusion

"Frenchie" looked closely at the impacts of the war on the veterans. Through the process of mechanization (particularly in the agricultural sector), advanced education (G.I. Bill), and the emerging oil industry, the Cajuns of the post-war period enjoyed a level of modernization, economic prosperity and social acceptance that had alluded their people throughout most of their history. More importantly, the Cajuns of World War II carved a niche in the American cultural landscape. In doing so, they found an identity, one of which they could finally be proud and thus planted the seeds for an ethnic revival that took hold in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This April 27 event filled a gap in history at a time when the last of the World War II veterans are dying. It combined the

experiences of the veterans who served overseas with those who mobilized the home front, analyzes their contributions on a regional, national and international level, and illustrates the war's impact on the people and culture. In conclusion, the emotional event left a lasting impression of deep and endearing people-to-people linkages between Canada and the United States.

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