

CANADIANS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Context is important in family history research, and when it comes to military matters, it would be foolish to ignore the big picture. Your soldier was not acting alone; he was part of a battalion, and an army, and an international undertaking. To adequately tell his story you need to consider every possible aspect of his time in the army. The idea of adding context is never more important than when dealing with a war veteran.

Several important sources of information are found on the Internet.

- Attestation reports. These are the most basic summaries of the enlisted men, and are usually just two pages. They are on the Library and Archives Canada website, and are indexed. You can download the images to add to your files.
 - Complete files. These are also on the Library and Archives website, and have been the subject of a major digitization project. Staff members are working through boxes of files and adding the images to the LAC website. There are about 640,000 files, and about 550,000 of them have been digitized so far.
- The size of the file will depend on the person, the time he served, and injuries or other noteworthy events. The file will have the most important dates and places, including transfers to and from areas and battalions, as well as medical and dental information. The file will tell you what the soldier was paid, and whether he assigned all or part of his pay to a relative. It will probably include some post-war details, such as medical treatment and an address. Don't be discouraged if you find that the file has a lot of duplication; there will a lot of good information to keep you busy.
- War diaries. These include detail on the movement of troops, and sometimes casualties. They are also on the Library and Archives Canada website.
 - Memorials. These are found on several sites, including the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Go to CanGenealogy.com/military.html for a comprehensive summary.
 - Newspapers. Information available might include mobilization details, itineraries, and personal information such as relatives, addresses and employment. You will usually find more coverage at the start of the war than at the end.
 - Letters. Check the Canadian Letters and Images Project, a website based at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo. Letters don't have to be from your family members to help increase your appreciation of what a soldier went through.

- Passenger lists. These show the return of soldiers to Canada. Look in the soldier's file for the date of departure and possibly the name of the ship.

Not everything is on the Internet. Be sure to check all sources.

- Books. These include guidebooks and histories. Watch for books on specific battalions. These might be available at university libraries or used book shops. An easy way to find out what is available is to check university catalogues and book sites such as abebooks.com. And don't forget to download a copy of the history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, available from the federal government's web site.

- Maps. They will give you a better idea of specific battle sites.

If you can, visit Europe to get a better sense of what happened.

- Cemeteries. See where relatives are buried. There are hundreds of them, and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is the best source of information.

- Memorials and monuments. The two most important for Canadians are at Vimy Ridge, near Arras, France, and at Vancouver Corner, northeast of Ypres, Belgium. There are, however, many more throughout the areas of conflict.

- Battlefields. People gave their lives fighting for certain points of land. When you stand on those spots, you will gain an appreciation that is not available in any book.

- Museums and archives. In every battle area, local people have dedicated themselves to researching the war, and ensuring that the sacrifices of the soldiers are not forgotten. These people can help you understand what happened.

More than the war itself:

- The soldiers spent all of that time overseas. What did they do there, besides fight in the war? What happened back home in Canada?

- Family matters. Many soldiers returned with English wives. Others were already married, and left their families in Canada while they went to war. How did those families cope? How did the war affect the wives and the children?

- Lasting impact. The fighting would have affected soldiers physically and psychologically. How did the war change their lives?

LINKS ARE AT WWW.CANGENEALOGY.COM/MILITARY.HTML

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