Researching Your Military Relatives

TYPES OF RECORDS TO SEARCH FOR

Start with your family

- Ask veterans, widows, their relatives and old friends or neighbours. RECORD any interviews if possible e.g. on a smartphone.
- Medals - Regimental number / Rank / Initials & Last Name / Unit are often on the rim and sometimes on the back. Some medals were awarded just for being in the war, some for going overseas, some for being in theatres of war e.g. Italy Star. Bravery awards if any were worn on the left as you look at the set. Then campaign medals, then general service types, then long service medals, coronation medals and foreign medals. Sometimes attached items tell more information e.g. Dieppe Raid, Air Crew, multiple awards, Mentioned in Despatches etc. NOTE: DO NOT WEAR ANYONE ELSE’S MEDALS, EVEN A DECEASED PARENT’S MEDALS AS IT IS ILLEGAL.
- Identity Discs (Americans called them “Dog Tags”) Usually show the name, serial number, religion, blood group. German discs do not have the name, but can be looked up.
- Discharge document (includes a summary of where they served, start and end dates, and medals awarded.)
- Service Record books (carried by a service person. Details of pay, next-of-kin, training, transfers, inoculations etc.)
- Insignia (cloth, metal, or plastic)
- Certificates of Qualification e.g. for a military training course
- Diaries
- Letters (letters sent home are often saved, but those sent overseas were rarely saved so one only has half of the conversation)
- Telegrams of “We regret to inform you ...” Wounded, captured, missing, presumed dead or dead. Sometimes people were presumed dead but turned up alive at the end of the war.
- Menus from military graduations, dinners etc. These are often signed by people in attendance.
- Souvenir photos and photo albums
- Scrap books
- Air Force Log Books (every plane and every mission they flew in)
- Uniforms (please do not cut badges off of uniforms!)
- War souvenirs
- “Trench Art” (Souvenirs made from crass shell casings, shrapnel, carved from chalk, belts with badges and buttons decorating them etc. These belts are nicknamed “hate belts” but that is a misnomer.)
• High School and University Annuals and newspapers – Sometimes they provided information on those from that school who joined up, were killed etc. A photo is usually included.

Other documents to look for in other locations:

• Service Records – documents signed when joining the military, promotions, medical, transfers, injuries, bravery awards, disciplinary actions, pay records. e.g. WWI Canadian Army Records online FREE “Soldiers of the First War” at Library and Archives Canada (LAC). Later Canadian records such as WWII and Korean War records are available to the veteran or next-of-kin. Other researchers have to wait 20-years after the person’s death due to privacy laws. Many U.S. records were destroyed or damaged in a records centre fire. War has caused destruction or damage to many other records e.g. Many British records were destroyed in WWII bombings.

• Nominal Rolls - In the back of unit histories, Nominal Rolls for CEF Battalions going overseas, Militia lists from the 1800s, British nominal rolls etc. 1885 North West Rebellion souvenir book has a nominal roll by unit. “The Souvenir Number of the Canadian Pictorial and Illustrated War News”.

• Regimental / Ship / Squadron histories

• Newspapers - e.g. Seaforth Highlanders photos of each man in a Vancouver newspaper in late 1939. Wartime stories of injuries, capture, deaths etc. often with a photo. Coming home photos when wounded or at the end of the war. Veterans telling their stories after coming home.

• Official service and unit history books (small examples done at the time, big fat books possibly came later) The higher their rank, or if they were awarded a high bravery award, the more likely that they are mentioned. E.g. The RCAF Overseas; The official History of The Royal Canadian Air Force; Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War.

• Medal Records – British Medal Record Cards are most useful as many original personnel records were lost. Sometimes Medals Rolls are published by medal collectors for a type of medal e.g. Canadian General Service Medal, Victoria Cross etc.

• Citations for bravery awards.

• Draft Registration Cards – The USA had the Draft. All men of certain ages had to register even if they were not in the military. This included visitors and permanent residents.

• Border crossing documents.

• Gazette publication (Officers)

• War Diaries, Ship Logs and Operational Records Books – Daily records of the unit/ship/squadron in action. Canadian War Diaries are online at LAC.

• Land grants for ex-soldiers (United Empire Loyalists, soldiers’ Land Grants after Riel Rebellions, etc.) e.g. On Ancestry.ca “Canada, Soldier Homestead Grant Registers, 1918-1931” and Metis scrip.

• Museums & Archives– Especially for that unit. Since the early 1970s, many units have formed regimental museums and archives. Usually run by volunteers. Larger organization museum e.g. RCAF Museum at Comox, National Air Force Museum at CFB Trenton, Naval and Army Museum at CFB Esquimalt, Canadian Military Engineers Museum at CFB Gagetown. Community archives often gather material on local units e.g. 6th DCOR (BC Regiment), Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, Irish Fusiliers, 7th, 16th, 29th, 72nd, 231st Battalions CEF at City of Vancouver Archives
WEB SITES

- Google.com – Search!!!
- CANADA / UK / COMMONWEALTH
  - Library and Archives Canada Personnel Records of the First World War (FREE) https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/personnel-records/Pages/search.aspx Canadian personnel records post WWI are usually sealed for personal privacy reasons until 20-years after the death of the person, though next-of-kin can get copies by providing evidence of link. If other relative either have to work through NOK or wait. “There are no access restrictions on the service files for members of the Canadian Armed Forces who died in service between 1939 and 1947, including those killed in action, those who subsequently died of injuries related to service, and those who died as a result of accident or illness while in service.” https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/military-medals-1812-1969/Pages/military-medals-honours-awards.aspx
  - United Empire Loyalists (FREE) http://www.uelac.org/
  - The National Archives (UK) in at Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU UK www.nationalarchives.gov.uk
  - Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) (FREE) – www.cwgc.org
  - How to research an award of the Military Medal https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/research-award-military-medal-mm/
- USA
  - Fold3 (U.S. Military) www.fold3.com (CHARGES FEES)
  - National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) also known as the National Archives (USA) www.archives.gov Includes “selective Service” records aka The Draft) https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/selective-service
- GENERAL
  - Military Collectors Club of Canada (MCCofC) http://www.mccofc.ca
  - Canadian Military Collectors Forum http://www.cdmilitarycollectors.com/
  - eBay www.eBay.com www.ebay.ca www.ebay.co.uk - One can sometimes find photos, documents etc.
  - Facebook www.FaceBook.com Special interest groups e.g. for a regiment, badge collectors, reenactor group, groups interested in a certain campaign or battle etc.
  - Victoria-Esquimalt Military Re-enactor Association (VEMRA) http://www.vemra.org Reenactor groups portraying a certain unit, mainly U.S. British, German and Canadian and early French. All periods.
  - Find a Grave www.findagrave.com (some grave markers show military service)
  - ANCESTRY www.Ancestry.ca - can search for military records
BOOKS

1. Unit histories e.g. THE SEAFORTH HIGHLANDERS OF CANADA 1919/1965 by Dr. R. H. Roy.
2. Regimental Numbers of the Canadian Army by the late Clive M. Law. The serial number of a soldier can often identify the unit he joined up with, thus narrowing the search.
3. Researching English Occupations – Military Services by Dr. Penelope Christensen
4. A Call to the Colours – Tracing Your Canadian Military Ancestors – Kenneth G. Cox
5. RCAF Squadrons and Aircraft by S. Kostenuk and J. Griffin (dates formed, where sent, names of Commanding Officers, photos of example aircraft)
6. They Shall Not Grow Old (and two supplements) by the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum, Brandon, MB These list RCAF members who were killed in WWII along with details on each person.
8. Canadian Badges 1920-1950 by Daniel Mazes (Helps to identify badges worn by a relative in old photos).
9. Military General Service 1793-1814 (Canadian Recipients) EGYPT MEDAL (1882-1889) (Canadian Recipients) NORTHWEST CANADA 1885

LOCAL LIBRARIES WITH SPECIAL GENEALOGICAL COLLECTIONS

- BCGS Walter Draycott Library & Resource Centre, Unit 211, 12837 – 76th Ave., Surrey, BC
- Family History Centres at:
  - 5280 Kincaid St, Burnaby, BC V5G 1V9 Phone (604) 299-8656
  - 6270 126 St, Surrey, BC V3X 1T9 Phone (604) 597-9695
  - 30635 Blueridge Dr, Abbotsford, BC V2T 5W3 Phone (604) 852-8043
- Cloverdale Branch of Surrey Library, 5642 176A St, Surrey, BC V3S 4G9 Phone (604) 598-7320
- Vancouver Public Library, 350 West Georgia Street; Vancouver, British Columbia; V6B 6B1

MAGAZINE ARTICLES FOUND IN GENEAOLOGY MAGAZINES

- Articles to assist genealogists that were published on anniversaries of key WWI and WWII dates;
  - Dating Old Military Photos; Finding Your Civil War Ancestors Photo Online; World War II Draft Registration Cards (USA)

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