

Canadians in the Air, 1914-1919, 1939-1945



Paul Goranson
Anchoring the Kite

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Introduction

Large-scale military aviation began with the First World War, not long after the 1909 flight of the Silver Dart marked the start of aviation in Canada. As no Canadian Air Force yet existed, thousands of Canadians fought the First World War in British flying units. Canadians first served with the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) or with the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). These two services amalgamated on 1 April 1918 into the Royal Air Force (RAF). In total, an estimated 13,000–22,000 individuals from Canada joined the British flying services.

In 1924, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) was created. With the outbreak of war in September 1939, the RCAF was able to draw on an existing cadre of officers and airmen and also attracted experienced personnel from private enterprise. By 1945, close to 250,000 men and women had served in the RCAF at home and abroad.

This guide will illustrate the process of researching an individual's service, from the essential starting point of service documents to supporting resources for detail and further discovery.

Helpful hint

See LAC's [Military Abbreviations used in Service Files](#) page.



**Photo album of
Flight Lieutenant
William Burt Bickell,
Royal Air Force**

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First World War, 1914-1919

While some recruitment and training were done in Canada, the flying services were British in organization, administration, and operation. For this reason, while Library and Archives Canada (LAC) holds some records relating to individuals, most First World War air services documentation is held at the [National Archives of England and Wales](#). Records can be located by searching the record references provided (ex. WO 363). Many records can be obtained online through the archive that holds them, or through [Ancestry.co.uk](#).

Royal Flying Corps: For airmen who died or were discharged before 1 April 1918, their service records (WO 363), pension matters (WO 364), and medal roll cards (WO 372) remained with the British Army, and can be searched at the National Archives in England.

Royal Naval Air Service: In Canada, the Royal Canadian Navy was responsible for enrolling Canadians who were interested in joining the Royal Naval Air Service. See LAC's [First World War Personnel Records database](#) to learn more about these files.

The National Archives in England holds Officers' service records between 1906 and 1918 (ADM 273), Ratings (rank) in the Royal Naval Air Service in the Register of Seamen's Services (ADM 188), and the Naval Medal and Award Rolls (ADM 171).

Royal Air Force: Records for Officers (AIR 76) and airmen (AIR 78; AIR 79) who remained in the flying services after the creation of the RAF in 1918 are held by the National Archives in England.

Limits of documentation

Wartime records were created and kept for specific purposes, with contemporary ideas of importance. For example, ethnic origin was not recorded and a hometown might only be inferred through the address of next of kin, who may only be identified as *Mrs. [husband's name]*. The language of administrative documentation was almost always English, regardless of the preferred language of the service person. In addition, some underage and overage soldiers gave a second name, while some names were misspelled in the administrative process.

Did you know?

Until 1916, men wanting to join the Royal Flying Corps or the Royal Naval Air Service had to first serve in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). A soldier had to be discharged from the cef before transferring to the flying services. These CEF service files are digitized and searchable through LAC's [Personnel records of the First World War](#).

Second World War, 1939–1945

During the Second World War the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) was involved in important operations such as coastal surveillance, convoy escort, strategic bombing, air-to-air combat, tactical support to ground forces, and the Battle of Britain. In addition, the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) was created to train Commonwealth and Allied air personnel in Canada, including pilots, navigators, air observers, bomb aimers, gunners, flight engineers, instructors and ground crew. By the end of the war, more than 130,000 aircrew had been trained on Canadian soil through this important program.

Service files for those who served with the RCAF during the war are held by Library and Archives Canada (LAC). All post-1919 **service files** are subject to privacy legislation; see LAC's [Requests for Military Service Files](#) page for the rules and procedures when accessing non-open records. Records of those who died in service between 1939 and 1947 are available without restriction.

Second World War service files are typically more extensive than those from the First World War, as all documents relating to an individual were retained. Second World War **service files** contain extensive personal information on the individual and in most cases include a photograph. The documentation between the two wars is otherwise similar as records were likewise required to prove service, pay, and medical details for pension purposes.

The most important documents are:

- **Attestation / Enrolment Paper:** Included basic personal information such as age, date and place of birth, parents, where resident, education, employment, medical and health information, as well as squadron or **unit**, and **service number**;
- **Record of Promotions, Reductions, Transfers, Casualties, Reports:** The key chronological summary of wartime employment, from date of enlistment to discharge. This document recorded what **unit** they served with, during what dates, and at what rank.
- **Service and Casualty Form:** Included training, postings, hospitalization and discharge.



Members of a Halifax bomber of 408 "Goose" Squadron

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Royal Canadian Air Force Briefing Before Kiska

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Museum Resources

The [Military History Research Centre \(MHRC\)](#) at the Canadian War Museum is the location of the Hartland Molson Library and the George Metcalf Archival Collection, both of which can be searched online through the [MHRC catalogue](#). Consulting a squadron history, if one exists, can yield key information such as missions, **unit** culture, photographs, operations, etc. For the promotions of officers, check *The Quarterly Army List* up until 31 March 1918 and *The Air Force List* after that date. The library also offers items relating to uniforms, equipment, training manuals, and specific books related to many aspects of service. The museum's archives are predominantly personal in nature and can add an intimate perspective to the official documentation held by LAC.

Tip: Search by squadron, training camp, hospital, or any other detail from a **service file** to find histories, base newsletters, diaries, personal photo albums, etc.

Try these search terms: *Squadron History, Aerial Operations, 1914-1919, 1939-1945*

During the MHRC hours of operation the library is open to browse and archival consultation appointments can be booked. To request archival material, contact mhrc-crhm@warmuseum.ca with your name, preferred date(s), and the catalogue control and call number for each item requested. Most library material is also available throughout Canada by interlibrary loan. Research copies or high-resolution images can also be ordered.

The artifact collections of the Canadian War Museum, from cap badges to tanks, can be searched online through the [artifact catalogue](#). This catalogue is the access point for the war art held by the museum, over 13,000 pieces, including depictions of individuals, ships, battles, hospitals, etc. The museum's website also offers resources including [online exhibitions](#) and a text-searchable collection of over 140,000 Second World War newspaper clippings.

Service Medals, Decorations of Honour, and Awards

Military medals were awarded according to specific criteria and convey particular meanings. Pins and badges could also serve similar functions. Service (or campaign) medals recognized time and place of service, meritorious service decorations were awarded for exemplary acts, and valour (or gallantry) decorations were awarded for demonstrated courage. Non-military "welcome home" medals were also popular. See [Medals from the Tilston Memorial Collection](#) to discover the people and stories behind medals held by the Canadian War Museum. [Medals and Decorations](#) by Veterans Affairs offers profiles of most medals and ribbons, and searching *medal** OR *honour** in the MHRC catalogue yields in-depth published resources.

For the First World War, service medals may include the 1914 Star, the 1914-1915 Star, the British War Medal, and the Victory Medal. For the Second World War

service medals may include the 1939-1945 Star, and one or more Stars for service in the Atlantic, Africa, Burma, Italy, or France and Germany, the Aircrew Europe Star, the Defence Medal, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal (CVSM), the War Medal 1939-1945.

Bravery and gallantry awards for both world wars include the Victoria Cross (VC), Air Force Cross, the Air Force Medal, the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM), the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC), the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), the Military Medal (MM), the Military Cross (MC), and Mentioned in Dispatches (MID). Bars on the ribbon typically indicate that the medal was awarded more than once.

Tip: The Air Force Association of Canada offers a database of Canadian recipients of honours and awards, "[Great War—Canadians in British Flying Services](#)".

War Dead



Peter Whyte
Wings and Fuselage of Wrecked Training Plane

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The [Canadian Virtual War Memorial](#) by Veterans Affairs Canada is a searchable database of Canada's war dead. In addition to providing a standardized profile, it also invites the public to attach photos, newspaper clippings, and other materials in commemoration. Burial and commemorative information is also available through the [Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#), the organization responsible for First and Second World War graves and monuments. At LAC, documentation includes the Circumstances of Death Registers and Veterans Death Cards.

Helpful hint

The [Directorate of History and Heritage](#) holds an archival card collection on more than 10,000 Canadians who served with the British flying services. The cards may contain personal and service information not available elsewhere. These records can be consulted at their research room.

Other Useful Records at LAC

RCAF Operational Record Books: The records of the RCAF training facilities, British Commonwealth Air Training Program schools, and the Women's Division. They are available at LAC (finding aid 24-104a) or digitally at LAC's partner website [Héritage](#).

Ledgers of CEF Officers Transferring to the Royal Flying Corps: Includes individuals seconded or attached to the RFC.

Nominal Roll of Canadian Airmen serving in the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Air Force: Includes name, rank, squadron, dates of service, casualty information, any honours or awards.

Toronto Curtiss Flying School, 1915-1916: Logbook that identifies student flyers and their minutes of instruction.

Military Medals, Honours and Awards, 1812-1969: An index to military honours and awards, with citation cards.

Suggested Readings

- *The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force*, v. 1 Sydney Wise; v. 2 W.A.B. Douglas; v.3 Brereton Greenhous et al. (University of Toronto Press, 1980-)
- Hatch, Fred J. *Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, 1939-1945* (Dept. of National Defence, 1983)
- Kostenuk, S., and J. Griffin. *RCAF Squadrons and Aircraft, 1924-1968* (Hakkert, 1977)
- Snowie, J. Allen. *Collishaw & Company: Canadians in the Royal Naval Air Service, 1914-1918* (Nieuport Publishing, 2010)



Swearing in the first women to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division

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Key Vocabulary

Casualty:

Typically means war dead, wounded, missing, or sick. Note that counts can vary widely depending on the inclusion/exclusion criteria and the accuracy of record-keeping. In the RCAF, accidents accounted for nearly half of the estimated 18,000 fatal casualties.

Service File:

Documentation relating to an individual's wartime service from enlistment or enrolment to discharge, including personal information, training, health, postings, and service. Note that while there is service documentation for the First World War British flying services, there are no compiled service files.

Service Number:

This was intended to be a unique identifying number. During the Second World War, they were prefixed with a letter. Lower ranks were given "R" numbers upon enlistment, but if subsequently commissioned as an officer, a new "J" number was assigned. "C" designated those who were members of the RCAF before 1939.

Unit:

An encompassing term that refers to any organized group that an individual could be assigned or attached to, including numbered squadrons, training schools, or depots.

With thanks to guest contributor Glenn Wright, former archivist at LAC.
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