

# Canadian Women in Uniform, 1914-1919, 1941-1945



**Molly Lamb Bobak**  
***CWACs Sorting Mail***

Beaverbrook Collection of War Art  
Canadian War Museum  
CWM 1971O261-1595

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## Introduction

Prior to the First World War, few women experienced military service. 12 women, including trained nurses and Anglican nuns, assisted government forces in nursing capacities during the North-West Resistance in 1885. During the South African War (1899-1902) 12 trained Canadian nurses were attached to the British medical services. This foreshadowed the significant contributions that Canadian women would make to the war effort in both the First and Second World Wars.

Between 1914 and 1919, more than 3,200 nurses served with the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) at home and overseas. More than 1,000 also volunteered to serve in British hospitals as nurses and nursing assistants. During the Second World War, while women once again volunteered as nurses, the role of women in the military underwent a significant expansion. The Canadian Army, the Royal Canadian Air Force, and the Royal Canadian Navy created women's divisions; as a result, about 50,000 women served in a variety of wartime occupations.

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.

### Did you know?

Nurses were officers by rank. They served under the normal chain of command and held seniority over their lower-ranking patients.

## Helpful hint

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



Wounded Canadians who took part in the capture of Hill 70 leaving a Casualty Clearing Station for Blighty

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## First World War, 1914-1919

At the outbreak of war, the call went out for trained nurses to enlist with the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Over the course of the war 2,845 Nursing Sisters were posted to the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and the Mediterranean where they served in **Casualty** Clearing Stations, hospitals, convalescent facilities, and on hospital ships. 700 Nursing Sisters also served in Canada in military hospitals and other medical facilities.

The First World War **service files** of Nursing Sisters are preserved at Library and Archives Canada (LAC). They are digitized and searchable through LAC's [First World War Personnel Records](#) database. This free database provides a digital image of the Nursing Sister's Attestation Paper, or Officer's Declaration, and a link to digital images of all her service documents. LAC's First World War section includes information on how to interpret the key **service file** documents.



The same database includes women who did not qualify as nurses and instead served as Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) in British hospitals, through the auspices of the Red Cross or the St. John Ambulance. Over 1,000 Canadian women volunteered as VADs and information about their contributions can be found in the “Imperial War Service Gratuities” files at LAC. Canadian nurses also served with the Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service (QUAIMNS). Their documentation can be found with [The National Archives of England and Wales](#) and the [British Red Cross](#).

In a **service file**, the most important service documents are:

- **Attestation Paper / Officer’s Declaration**

**Paper:** This document was an application, and contract, to serve. It identified a Nursing Sister, distinguished her from other women with similar names, and captured essential personal information including previous experience, next of kin, and religious denomination.

- **Casualty Form—Active Service:** This form is the most important document on file. It records the ‘where’, ‘when’, and ‘with what **unit**’ details of service. It includes a Nursing Sister’s date of arrival in England (often with the name of the ship), initial postings in England, dates of postings “overseas” in France, Belgium or Salonika, of joining a **unit**, promotions, and transfers. It also includes any **casualty** information, hospitalization, and the names and locations of the hospitals where she was treated. At the end of the war, it documents her demobilization, departure for home, and discharge.

**Service files** also include various forms, index cards, and documents that capture information about the nursing sister and her contribution to the war: a certificate of service, a medal card, etc. Documentation relating to separation allowance and assigned pay can be useful in identifying next of kin and relationships. The medical and health condition of the individual before, during the war, and at discharge was also recorded in detail.

Note that not all service documents were retained. Rather, two types of information were prioritized for determining pension eligibility: proof of service in the military (including dates, rank, postings, and pay), and medical/health condition during service.

### 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.



Canadian Airwomen  
marching for inspection  
in London, England

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[CWM 19830188-003](#)

## Second World War, 1939–1945



WREN Beryl Bateman packing survival equipment  
in an aircraft dinghy

George Metcalf Archival Collection  
Canadian War Museum  
[CWM 19820319-002](#)

In response to the expansion of available military opportunities, Canadian women volunteered in great numbers during the Second World War. They served in Canada and overseas in a wide variety of non-combat positions previously held exclusively by men, with the aim of “freeing up” the men for combat duty. The women’s services employed 21,700 Canadian Women’s Army Corps (CWAC); 7,100 Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS or “Wrens”); 17,000 Royal Canadian Air Force Women’s Division (WD); and 4,600 Nurses. Their service in uniform represents a significant milestone in the role of women in Canadian society. However, all women’s services except military nursing were disbanded in 1946.

The **service files** for those who served with the Canadian women’s services 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 and detailed than those from the First World War, as all documents relating to an individual were retained. 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:** This document was an application, and contract, to serve and was completed by all women who volunteered with the Army, Navy, Air Force and nursing service. The form captures personal information such as age, date and place of birth, parents, where resident, education, employment, medical and health information, as well as regiment 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 records the 'where', 'when', and 'with what unit' details of service.
- **Service and Casualty Form:** Includes training, postings, hospitalization, and discharge.

Second World War service records contain considerable detail relating to a service women's personal and family information. Files also include various forms and correspondence relating to her pre-war occupational history, medals, last pay, and estate documents for those who died during service.

## 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 **unit** history, if one exists, can yield key information such as key events, group culture, photos, names of others in the unit, etc. 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 **unit**, training camp, hospital, or any other detail from a **service file** to find regimental histories, camp newsletters, diaries, personal photo albums from a particular **unit**, etc.

**Try these search terms:** *Women OR Female Participation, Women's Division, Canadian Women's Army Corps, Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, 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](mailto: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 collection 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



Service Pin

Canadian War Museum  
CWM 20160341-002

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. At this time, the only military honours that Nursing Sisters qualified for were the Royal Red Cross, Class 1 and Class 2 medals for exceptional duty, ability and bravery, as well as Mentioned in Dispatches (MID). Bars on the ribbon typically indicate that the medal was awarded more than once.

For the Second World War the most common service medals were the Defence Medal, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal (CVSM), the War Medal 1939-1945. Service women were also eligible for one or more Stars for service in Africa, Burma, Italy, or France and Germany.

# War Dead

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 for specific time periods includes the Circumstances of Death and War Graves Registers, and Veterans Death Cards.

## Other Useful Records at LAC

**Guide to Sources relating to Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force:** An index to all files in the custody of LAC relating to specific units of the CEF.

**War Diaries:** The daily record of unit activities in the field, including administration and operations. While individuals are rarely mentioned by name, these can provide useful context.

**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](#).

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

## Suggested Readings

- Department of National Defence. *Equal to the Challenge: An Anthology of Women's Experiences During World War II. 2nd edition* (National Defence, 2001)
- Dundas, Barbara. *A History of Women in the Canadian Military*. (Art Global, 2000)
- Roach Pierson, Ruth. *Canadian Women and the Second World War*. (Canadian Historical Association, 1983)
- Toman, Cynthia. *Sister Soldiers of the Great War: The Nurses of the Canadian Army Medical Corps*. (UBC Press, 2016)



# Key Vocabulary

## Casualty

Typically means war dead, wounded, missing, or sick. Note that casualty counts vary widely depending on the inclusion/exclusion criteria and the accuracy of record-keeping.

## Service file:

Documentation relating to an individual's wartime service from enlistment or enrolment to discharge, including personal information, training, health, postings, and service.

## Service or regimental number:

This was intended to be a unique identifying number. As officers, Nursing Sisters during the First World War were not assigned service numbers. Women who served in the Second World War had numbers prefixed with the letter "W".

## Unit:

An encompassing term that refers to any organized group that an individual could be assigned or attached to, including regiment, battalion, squadron, ship, hospital, etc.

**Molly Lamb Bobak**  
**Canadian Women's Army Corps**  
**Officer Cadets and N.C.O.'s**  
**Waiting for the Montreal Train**

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

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