

1993

News from the Director General History: Searching for Information about Individuals

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Recommended Citation

Christie, Carl A. "News from the Director General History: Searching for Information about Individuals." *Canadian Military History* 2, 2 (1993)

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News from the Director General History

Searching for Information about Individuals

Carl A. Christie

Many people, either in person or by directing an inquiry to us, look for information at DG Hist about individual service personnel and their careers. The holdings of our archives, while not always easy to use, can be a veritable mine of information for this type of query and, insofar as there is no infringement of the Privacy Act (which protects personal information until twenty years after an individual's date of death), the staff are only too willing to help. However, given the "downsizing" of the public service, it may take some time for an inquirer to receive a reply.)

Having said that, it should be noted that the DG Hist resources are stronger in some areas than in others. For example, there is no point in looking for anything about pre-twentieth century military figures at this office. Beyond having a good research library for Canadian military history, we hold few specialized sources for subjects prior to the First World War. In fact, given the recent emphasis on producing official Second World War histories, that is the period for which DG Hist probably holds the richest resources.

In addition to the published sailing lists for Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) battalions (which give information on personal background and previous military service for all ranks), two useful collections exist in this office for First World War searches: one for officers of the CEF and the other for Canadian airmen in that conflict.

Many historians, as well as other researchers, like genealogists, long ago discovered the papers of Lieutenant-Colonel H.M. Jackson, one-time head of war records, many of which are held at DG Hist. Amongst other activities relating to military history, Lieutenant-Colonel Jackson devoted an incredible amount of time to making notes summarizing the military careers of CEF officers. A person looking for information on one of these men can do worse than starting with the Jackson Papers (as long as the object of the search has a surname beginning before the middle of the letter "T," for this is where the alphabetically arranged notes end). The handwriting and the cryptic shorthand abbreviations can be difficult to decipher, but the rewards can be worth it. Long before the National Archives of Canada (NAC) opened the CEF personnel records to public scrutiny, many people had learned details of officers careers from the notes taken (probably from the same files) years earlier by Lieutenant-Colonel Jackson.

The First World War flyers' cards contain less information but, in many ways, they fill an even greater void. With no Canadian Citizenship Act until 1947, it is very difficult to identify, much less track, the careers of the more than 20,000 Canadians who served in the Royal Flying Corps, the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Air Force during the First World War. Evidently the RCAF's Air Historical Section spent a great deal of time combing British records identifying airmen who, by most

SURNAME Schiller		K. 10920	
CHRISTIAN NAMES Clarence Alvin		REMARKS	
NATIONALITY American (Prot.)		Single Twin Engine	
AGE 40	DATE OF BIRTH 18-6-00	PLACE Iowa, U.S.A.	Boats 4000 hrs.
PERMANENT ADDRESS 3 Ostend Ave. Toronto, Ont.		Single Twinn Engine La	
		Land planes 3500 hrs.	
		Amphibians 1000 hrs.	
MARRIED X	SINGLE	CHILDREN I	Instrument Rating
NAMES OF CHILDREN Barbara Jane		AGE 7	completed C.A.A.
		AGE	course, Weyne, Mich.
		AGE	course Camp Jordan
NEXT OF KIN Mrs. D.D. Schiller		Mrs. D.D. Schiller (w)	
ADDRESS same as above		3425 Pyramont Ave	
		Montreal	
LICENSE NO. 4792		all types	
CATEGORY			
DATE ACCEPTED FOR TEST OR TRAINING			
DATE APPOINTED			
RETAIL CREDIT	R.C.M.P.	IMMIGRATION	
REQUESTED			
RECEIVED			
SCHILLER	a	C.A.	ATFERO I V C F N L H A



RAF Ferry Command crew assignment card for Clarence Alvin "Duke" Schiller. Duke Schiller, a civilian pilot, found himself too old for active military service in World War II. Like many other experienced airmen, he made an important contribution by flying North American-built military aircraft to the RAF overseas. The cards which detail his Ferry Command Service list stops at airfields across the North and South Atlantic Ferry routes, as well as a trip to Australia. The final entry in his record notes tersely, "Killed in crash. 13/3/43" after the Catalina he was delivering came down hard on the sea out of Bermuda. These records exist for most of the estimated 6,000 aircrew, military and civilian, who passed through Ferry Command headquarters at Dorval, Montreal.

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acceptable standards (country of birth or long-time residence, etc.) could be considered Canadian. The story of these airmen was ultimately revealed to the world in Syd Wise's *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, (Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Volume 1), which would have been hard to write had the earlier air historians not compiled their card file.

Fortunately, most people seeking information about airmen are looking at the Second World War rather than the First. Here, in addition to published officers' graduation lists and some Routine Orders (though the only known collection of part II unit ROs, detailing the arrival and departure of personnel, is held by the NAC at the Personnel Records Centre (PRCj), DG Hist holds a number of useful archival sources. This includes a microfilm copy of cards kept at the Canadian

Forces Records Centre (which evolved into the PRC), known as the CFRC index, card files for RCAF awards and prisoners of war, as well as RCAF unit diaries and operations record books (ORB). One can often use these documents to learn more about an individual or an incident in his career.

For example, a not untypical inquiry might include a statement something like this:

I am looking for information about John Doe, who was killed on August 16th, 1944.

This is a fictitious quotation taken from an imaginary letter. It is, however, typical of the kind of questions frequently researched at DG Hist, by both visitors to the public reading room and by staff in response to inquiries. We receive many requests, directly and through our political masters, that present this type of research problem.

We can use this hypothetical example to illustrate both the potential and the limitations of the sources at DG Hist (and, by extension, other repositories as well).

If the John Doe mentioned in the make-believe enquiry was a soldier or a sailor, and no further information was provided by the inquirer, any search would have to be undertaken in the vast holdings of the NAC, which holds the Canadian Army war diaries and RCN ships' logs, as well as the personnel files of veterans. Only limited information could be found at DG Hist; for some unknown reason, even the microfilmed CFRC index includes only RCAF personnel. In such circumstances, the research staff must simply refer inquirers to the appropriate institutions.

The notable exception to this sweeping generalization about soldiers and sailors concerns Second World War citations and recommendations for awards. DG Hist holds

two extremely valuable collections of awards documents: one for the Army, covering the Second World War, and one for the Navy covering the war and part of the post-war years. We have no way of knowing how complete these files are, but they have proven extremely useful for a wide array of users. The RCN documents appear to be primary copies of citations. The Army material tends to be original recommendations for a specific award, signed by the various commanders as the document went up the chain of command. For many researchers, simply seeing some of the signatures makes reading one of these documents worthwhile, even exciting — and the recommendations often include more details of an exploit than are given credit in the published citation.

As an side, we should note that First World War citations are extremely difficult to find. Citations were only rarely placed on an individual's personnel file, so even recourse to

Recommendation for an Immediate Military Medal for Sergeant Joseph Young, 17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars. This self-explanatory document describes an incident during the Battle of the Scheldt and is representative of others in the collection of Army recommendations. Note the signatures, culminating with that of Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, Commander-in-Chief of 21 Army Group.

Action for which commended (Date and place of action must be stated)		Recommended by	Honour or Reward	(To be left blank)
<p>On 26 Oct 44 SOUTH of OOSTEBURG, an armoured car under command of Sgt Young was ordered to assist an Assault Troop on to its objective. Going in advance, the car came under heavy Mortar and MG fire from enemy positions, well dug in. Although all tires were punctured and two vehicles on his left were blown up on mines, Sgt Young continued to advance, throwing grenades from the open turret and capturing 15 Prisoners of War. He then ordered his gunner to engage the enemy and dismounted from his vehicle. With assistance he cleared the road of mines and gained the objective which was consolidated by the Assault Troop after the capture of 70 Prisoners of War. The coolness and courage shown by Sgt Young was an inspiration to all concerned and enabled the</p>		<p><i>[Signature]</i> (C.A. Baerman) A/Lt-Col, Comd, 7 Cdn Recce Regt (17 DYRCH)</p> <p><i>[Signature]</i> (D C Spry) Maj-Gen GOC 3 Cdn Inf Div</p> <p><i>[Signature]</i> (G. G. Simonds) Lt-Gen Comd 2 Cdn Corps 18 Nov 44</p>	<p>Immediate M.M.</p>	

W/A Brigade 3 Cdn Inf Division 2 Cdn Corps

Schedule No. Unit GAC - 7 Cdn Recce Regt (17 DYRCH)

Army No. and Rank D3353 Sgt

Name Joseph YOUNG (Christian name must be stated)

Date recommendation passed forward

Received	Passed
Originated	30 Oct 44
Division	13 Nov 44
Corps	NOV 17 1944
Army	5 DEC 1944

21 NOV 1944

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the PRC usually proves futile. Often the best one can do is to track down the original notice in *The London Gazette* — at one of the few institutions to hold it, such as the National Library of Canada — if one has been able to find a proper reference to the date and issue of its promulgation, in the personnel file or the Jackson Papers. Even finding a citation can sometimes be disappointing. Frequently it is simply a name in a long list of recipients being honoured for distinguished service.

If the search concerns a Second World War airman, DG Hist holdings should yield some information. The old Air Historical Section compiled a useful card file of RCAF citations which provides much the same type of information as the Army and Navy collections, as well as similar files on overseas casualties and prisoners of war. There are also card files on air crashes in Canada, organized by date, aircraft type and pilot. With emphasis over the past several years on researching and writing the official history of the RCAF, DG Hist's archives contain many extremely useful air force files.

In our hypothetical example, if John Doe was a member of the RCAF, his name should be found on the CFRC index (which would summarize his postings and promotions in a few lines), possibly on a card in the card file of RCAF overseas casualties (which would supply the squadron number, the aircraft, and the names of the other crew members), and, (if he was with an RCAF squadron), in the squadron ORB, which records the aircraft type and sometimes its number, as well as the crew, along with a terse description of the mission and a preliminary indication of its outcome.

None of these sources would give a great deal of information, but taken together, they would probably allow the inquirer to learn what he or she wanted to know about the unfortunate airman and the operation on which he was lost. We should caution that, if the CFRC index indicates that he was attached to the RAF, and/or if the casualty card records that he was flying with an RAF squadron at the time of the incident, we will generally be unable to answer the basic questions in Canada. At

this point it would be necessary for the inquirer to try the usually fruitless tactic of contacting the British repositories, where the restrictions governing access to personnel records are even more stringent than in Canada.

While most of the above is based on an imaginary inquiry, it is quite representative of questions often received about individual service personnel. Unfortunately, we are unable to do as much with this type of request when it concerns the RCN or Army as we can do for one of the Air Force. As already mentioned, the appropriate army and navy records are held by the NAC. That institution is consolidating all its public service functions under a Reference and Researcher Services Division, so we hope that inquirers and visitors alike will receive full, prompt replies to their research questions.

I do not want to give readers false hope that all their research problems can be solved. I hope, however, that the foregoing gives some idea of how detailed questions about individual military careers can be answered from available DG Hist resources without having to go to a larger institution like the NAC.

Carl Christie is Senior Research Officer at the Director General History. He is currently completing a history of RAF Ferry Command.